



Unfulfilled Promise: Ensuring High Quality Teachers for Our Nation's Students

*No Child Left Behind:
A Status Report from
Southeastern Schools*

THE SOUTHEAST CENTER FOR
TEACHING
QUALITY SECTO
www.teachingquality.org

The Southeast Center for Teaching Quality improves student learning by shaping policies through developing teacher leadership, building coalitions, and conducting practical research. To accomplish this mission, SECTQ strives to shape policies that ensure:

- **Students**, no matter what their background or where they go to school, are ready to learn; with
- **Teachers** who are caring, qualified, and competent with vast content knowledge and the ability, through quality preparation and ongoing development and support, to ensure that all children can learn; in
- **Classrooms** that have adequate resources and provide environments conducive to student learning; in
- **Schools** that are designed to provide teachers with sufficient time to learn and work together in collaboration with a principal who respects and understands teaching; in
- **Districts** that have policies and programs that support the recruitment, retention and development of high quality teachers in every school; in
- **States** that have well-funded systems that include rigorous preparation and licensing with evaluation tools that ensure performance based standards are met; in a
- **Region** that works collaboratively, using common teaching quality definitions, sharing data, and working across state lines to recruit, retain and support high quality teachers; in a
- **Nation** that views teaching as a true profession and values teachers as one of its most important resources.

SECTQ is a regional organization with a national agenda to ensure that all students have access to high quality teaching. SECTQ was established in 1999 and is located in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. To learn more about SECTQ's work, and to access a more detailed report of our findings, please visit www.teachingquality.org.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While national attention has been riveted on the accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), few have focused on what matters most to ensure that all students make adequate yearly progress—a high quality teacher. Research tells us this is the single most important factor influencing student achievement. NCLB’s focus on highly qualified teachers holds the promise of closing the teaching gap in schools where poor and minority children are the most likely to have the least prepared teachers.

The Southeast Center for Teaching Quality (SECTQ), with support from the Ford, Rockefeller, and Z. Smith Reynolds Foundations, conducted case studies in four states, 12 districts, and 24 high-need schools in the southeast to examine whether the call for highly qualified teachers is being realized.

Sadly, our answer is no. NCLB’s narrow emphasis on content knowledge and its lack of financial and technical assistance have driven states to lower standards for teachers. And districts, on which successful implementation hinges, continue to struggle with meeting the law’s requirements.

After talking with more than 160 educators and surveying hundreds of teachers, our research revealed three major findings:

- **“Highly Qualified” Does Not Ensure High Quality:** Under NCLB, teachers are considered “highly qualified” if they meet specific requirements. These requirements, however, focus primarily on what teachers know, not on what they are able to do. We learned from our case studies that successful teachers have both content knowledge and teaching skills, such as knowing how to address different students’ learning needs, especially those whose primary language is not English.

The issue is exacerbated by guidance from the U.S. Department of Education that defines teachers who have enrolled in alternative certification programs with no prior preparation—and often without having passed the state’s content assessment—as highly qualified.

- **Hard-to-Staff Solutions Are Hard to Find:** After SECTQ reviewed the states’ data showing their progress toward meeting the highly qualified requirements, it appeared as if many were well on their way to meeting the 100 percent highly qualified teacher requirements. These averages, however, obscure the pervasive recruitment and retention challenges faced by hard-to-staff schools and districts. Leaders in the urban and rural districts we visited struggled, even with additional NCLB funds, to compete in the teacher labor market.

What is more, in recruiting teachers few schools moved beyond signing bonuses to more comprehensive approaches, such as better working conditions and long-term support for

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teachers. Many teachers in these schools felt ill-prepared to help their students. Many worried that NCLB's push for "scientifically based" professional development would lead to "canned" programs sold by a favored vendor, rather than the customized assistance desperately needed to work successfully with English language learners and to develop effective individualized education plans—common challenges in hard-to-staff schools.

"We [rural districts] are passing around teachers who are not very competent."

- **Same Approaches Will Lead to the Same Results:** Most of the schools and districts we visited had not changed their recruitment or professional development practices since NCLB was passed. "Business as usual" occurred for several reasons. Antiquated data systems and ever changing definitions of highly qualified teachers have confounded district personnel. Districts, particularly in smaller rural areas, lack the capacity to recruit and provide ongoing support to teachers. And, even when models of success are shared, the on the ground assistance needed to customize the models to meet districts' needs are not available. Even with the additional NCLB educator quality funds, the rural schools we studied just did not have the capacity or dollars to get the job done.

Still, there is good news to report. Principals and administrators told us that NCLB has forced them to consider more seriously teacher assignments and the distribution of licensed teachers. Some districts, mostly large urban districts with greater resources, have initiated innovative approaches to recruiting and retaining teachers, including pay for performance plans, the creation of specialized master's programs in urban teaching, targeted literacy training, and other incentives such as free tuition and housing loans. However, these innovative efforts, often sustained and now funded by NCLB, were initiated long before the law and catalyzed by strong district leadership, community support, and significant investments in teaching quality efforts.

Recommendations

Much needs to be done from the classroom to the Capitol to ensure that NCLB helps all students get the knowledgeable teachers they need and deserve. NCLB represents an unprecedented role for the federal government in educating the nation's children. This new role requires clear and consistent guidance and assistance to states, as well as sufficient funding to ensure districts can meet the requirements.

If districts focus on teaching quality—recruiting or developing well-prepared teachers and investing in their continued professional growth—the highly qualified requirements will be met.

States also play a critical role in ensuring teaching quality, setting standards for the profession, and developing licensing requirements. State policies and NCLB requirements must work with each other rather than against each other.

Finally, the success of NCLB's efforts to place a highly qualified teacher in every classroom falls squarely on the shoulders of local districts that control virtually all of the federal teaching quality funds. Districts must address teacher recruitment and retention with an emphasis on quality, not solely on meeting the mandates of NCLB. If districts focus on teaching quality—recruiting or developing well-prepared teachers and investing in their continued professional growth—the highly qualified requirements will be met.

In the end, it will take nothing less than a concerted and coordinated effort of the federal government, states, and districts to overhaul the way we recruit, license, induct, and support teachers to ensure that we have not only a highly qualified teacher but also high quality teaching in every classroom, every day.

(For a complete list of SECTQ's recommendations, see page 16.)

INTRODUCTION

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 has generated much discussion from practitioners and policymakers from both sides of the political aisle and increasingly, the general public. While the definition of “adequate yearly progress” and the accountability provisions of NCLB have received the most public attention, a key area—the call for highly qualified teachers—remains largely overlooked. Although education policy groups have spoken to the implementation of “highly qualified” teacher provisions,¹ no research prior to this report has studied how urban and rural schools and districts are responding to these requirements.

To learn more, with the support of the Ford, Rockefeller, and Z. Smith Reynolds Foundations, the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality (SECTQ) conducted site visits in four states, 12 districts, and 24 high-need schools, especially those in rural and urban areas that are struggling to recruit and retain teachers. This report captures the stories of how states, schools, and districts are responding to NCLB’s teaching quality mandates and brings the perspectives of district administrators, principals, and teachers to this important discussion.

High Quality Teachers: NCLB’s Promise and Challenges

NCLB has positioned the federal government to exert considerably more influence in setting standards for teachers by requiring that all teachers in core academic subjects be “highly qualified” by the 2005–06 school year. Under the law, highly qualified teachers must hold at least a bachelor’s degree, have full state teacher certification or have passed the state licensure exam and hold a license to teach, and demonstrate competence in each academic subject in which they teach.²

Our research indicates that NCLB has the promise to address the long-time barriers that have hampered efforts to recruit and retain teachers, especially in schools serving poor and minority students. NCLB’s “highly qualified” teacher requirements correctly target schools serving the most disadvantaged students, first by requiring states to ensure that poor and minority children are not taught by inexperienced, unqualified or out-of-field teachers at higher rates than other children. It also calls for higher standards for paraprofessionals and requires states to ensure that all teachers are participating in “high quality” professional development.

The federal focus on “highly qualified” teachers also has the potential to drive new state and local actions, prompting universities to prepare teachers more effectively, school districts to create more effective professional development programs, local administrators to implement new recruitment and retention strategies, and teachers to think and act differently with regard to their own profession.

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Some of the very provisions designed to improve teaching quality are prompting some states and districts to lower teaching standards.

Unfortunately, our research indicates that NCLB's promise remains unfulfilled. Some of the very provisions designed to improve teacher quality are prompting some states and districts to lower teaching standards. For example, individuals enrolled in alternative certification programs are considered highly qualified under the law—even if they have no prior preparation or have not passed the state's content assessment.

Throughout this report, we discuss NCLB's potential and its shortcomings, as described by those on the front lines—teachers, school principals, and district administrators. We also suggest action steps for district administrators, state departments of education, and federal legislators to strengthen the teacher provisions of the law and improve their implementation of it.

SECTQ's research reveals three primary findings:

- **“Highly Qualified” Does Not Ensure High Quality:** The current federal definition focuses predominantly on content knowledge, ignoring critical knowledge and skills that teachers must possess to improve student learning.
- **Hard-to-Staff Solutions Are Hard to Find:** Current funding models fail to account for the magnitude of the challenges facing hard-to-staff schools and districts.
- **Same Approaches Will Lead to the Same Results:** Sufficient resources, clearer and more consistent guidance, customized technical assistance, and widely distributed examples of what works must be made accessible to all educators.

Collecting Research Data—Participating States, Districts, and Schools

We conducted our investigation in four southeastern states—Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. We selected these states, in large part, because of the differences in their teacher policies and the extent to which they have addressed teaching standards. Education stakeholder groups in each state helped identify districts based on several criteria, including high poverty and/or high minority student populations, below average performance on state achievement assessments, high teacher turnover, difficulty in teacher recruitment, and geographic diversity.

Findings and recommendations draw from teachers surveys and interviews with more than 160 individuals in 12 districts and 24 schools.

We selected 12 districts: four large urban districts, one mid-sized urban district, two rural districts near major metropolitan areas, and five remote rural districts. We sought districts with a reputation for making progress toward improving teacher quality. The size of the districts ranged from 1,500 students and 100 teachers to more than 100,000 students and 7,000 teachers. Included in the sample are 11 elementary schools, eight middle schools, and five high schools. Most are Title I schoolwide programs.

SECTQ surveyed teachers in core academic subjects from the 24 selected schools in fall 2003. Between October 2003 and February 2004, SECTQ conducted three-day site visits in these schools and districts. During each visit, researchers conducted focus groups with teachers and interviewed principals, superintendents, and district-level administrators (primarily those in charge of human resources, Title I, and professional development programs). The following findings and recommendations draw from teacher surveys and interviews with more than 160 individuals in these districts.

FINDING 1

“HIGHLY QUALIFIED” DOES NOT ENSURE HIGH QUALITY

Content Knowledge Is Necessary, Not Sufficient

“I’ve been in this business for 38 years, and to be honest I have never seen a teacher get into difficulty because they didn’t have the content. It has always been they didn’t have the mastery of teaching strategies.”

—human resource administrator, rural district

Although the letter of the law promotes the idea that “highly qualified” teachers both know their subject matter and know how to teach it effectively, leaders in the U.S. Department of Education have chosen to emphasize content knowledge and give little attention to instructional practice. In the July 2003 *Second Annual Report on Teacher Quality*, Secretary of Education Rod Paige focuses on two principles: requiring teachers to pass standardized tests of content knowledge and lowering barriers for those entering the profession.

In contrast, many teachers and administrators we interviewed said that content knowledge alone is insufficient for a teacher to merit the label of “highly qualified.” They called for additional emphasis on skills such as understanding the developmental stages of student learning, using multiple types of student assessment data, and revising instruction on a daily basis. Respondents said these skills are especially critical in communities in which economic and social issues complicate the relationships among students, teachers, schools, and parents. “It takes more than a bachelor’s degree in your content [area] to understand how to teach, to get through to these kids,” said a teacher from an urban district.

Many teachers and administrators we interviewed said that content knowledge alone is insufficient for a teacher to merit the label of “highly qualified.”

Because of this stark difference between the federal definition of “highly qualified” and educators’ views of quality teaching, we heard many cases of “false positives” and “false negatives” in assigning highly qualified status. “I’ve checked more than 500 transcripts, and I can assure you that some who have met the definition are not some of our best and brightest,” said one human resources administrator.

For the highly qualified mandates to result in higher quality teaching, SECTQ urges states to align licensing and NCLB requirements so teachers are required not only to have content knowledge but also to demonstrate an understanding of how to teach the content to diverse learners.

Teacher Preparation and Experience Matter

“Nine out of the 10 people we have hired on alternative certification are dismal failures. We hired one person with a great science background, but he had not ever had the first education class. He had no clue. That was disastrous for those students.”

—human resource administrator, rural district

NCLB considers participants from a variety of alternative certification programs highly qualified, despite the lack of preparation these teachers receive before they enter the classroom. Administrators said teachers without a background in classroom management and without expertise in how to teach diverse learners fail to increase student learning. A curriculum and instruction director in a large urban district told us that many alternative certification teachers lack important teaching skills: “A lot of these [alternative certification] teachers think that they would go to the textbook, cover the material, review the material, test the children, and give them a numerical grade. I didn’t say ‘teach’ in any of that, and that’s the hard part.”

When teachers are sufficiently prepared, alternative certification programs can be beneficial.

When teachers are sufficiently prepared, alternative certification programs can be beneficial. Administrators spoke positively about alternative route teachers who already had significant experiences in classroom settings as paraprofessionals or substitutes. Because of teacher shortages, many district administrators were thankful for programs such as Georgia’s Teacher Alternative Preparation Program (TAPP), which placed more than 1,400 teachers during the 2001–02 and 2002–03 school years.³ Yet a teacher who participated in TAPP told us that the brief training she received did not fully prepare her to enter the classroom and that she would not consider herself “highly qualified.”

To make up for this lack of preparation, NCLB requires that alternatively certified teachers receive high quality, sustained, classroom-focused professional development and participate in an intensive induction or mentoring program.⁴ Unfortunately, we found schools and districts unprepared to offer this kind of support. Some of the alternative certification programs we examined have no professional development or mentoring requirements at all.

We also found that many students in traditional teacher education programs in university settings are not ready to teach students who learn in different ways. One administrator described a misalignment between what university programs produce and the kind of teachers schools need. A human resource director in a large urban district echoed this sentiment, arguing that the programs prepare teachers for suburban rather than urban schools.

States must consider ways to create high quality alternative routes to teaching that include substantial induction and mentoring programs. As long as NCLB considers unprepared alternative route teachers highly qualified, many schools will continue to experience teacher turnover, and their students will never reap the benefits of high quality teaching.

It’s Hard to Know Whether Someone Knows Their Content

“When you take the High Objective Uniform State System of Evaluation (HOUSSE), you see that the rhetoric says one thing and then when you get down to substance, it’s not there. A standard is given, and then you are given avenues around it. As such, teaching and learning are not going to be changed.”

—professional development director, urban district

NCLB allows teachers to prove in several ways that they are competent in the subject matter they teach. They can pass a subject matter test (PRAXIS II), possess or earn an academic major in the subjects they teach, or meet the standards of an alternative content-based evaluation system specifically designed by states.

While the paper-and-pencil test offers a standardized measure, it only assesses minimal competency at best.

Educators we spoke with said these approaches to proving a teacher’s subject matter competency present problems. While the paper-and-pencil test offers a standardized measure, it only assesses minimal competency at best. The passing scores also differ among states, so a teacher may be highly qualified in one state and not in another.

The academic major requirement raises different questions. Historically, colleges and universities set the standards for what constitutes an academic major. Under NCLB, states have defined the number of credit hours necessary for a major. This means that teachers who already have a major according to their university’s standards may need more classes to earn a major under NCLB’s standards. Since the required credit hours vary across our four states, a teacher could be highly qualified in Alabama but not in Georgia.

There also is wide variation in how states craft their own alternative competency standards on content knowledge (often referred to as HOUSSE) to meet NCLB requirements. Such variation prohibits cross-state comparisons and allows teachers to more easily achieve highly qualified status in some states than it does in others. For example, although teachers in each of the four states can use professional activities to demonstrate subject knowledge, the states weigh the same activities differently. Teachers in Tennessee can earn five points for each year of teaching in their respective content area, for a maximum of 40 points. Alabama teachers, however, can earn only two points per year for a maximum of 40 points. Consequently, a Tennessee teacher only needs eight years’ experience to earn the 40 points that would take an Alabama teacher 20 years to accrue. One district administrator referred to HOUSSE as a quality loophole large enough “to run a truck through.”

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These strategies for setting content knowledge standards leave school administrators scrambling to have teachers pass multiple-choice, content tests and take university classes, which often have limited relevance to classroom teaching. To improve teaching quality, content knowledge requirements must encourage professional learning that is relevant to actual classroom teaching.

FINDING 2

HARD-TO-STAFF SOLUTIONS ARE HARD TO FIND

Recruiting Quality Teachers Hinges on “Survival of the Fittest”: Hard-to-Staff Urban and Rural Schools Cannot Compete

“We really worked to find teachers this past year, but the [only] two math teachers we could find had just been released by another school system. So, we hire them for two to three years and then don’t renew them. We are passing around teachers who are not very competent.”

— superintendent, rural district

Our case studies revealed urban and rural schools that are struggling to recruit the highly qualified teachers required by NCLB. In one elementary school we visited, only 29 percent of the teachers are fully licensed, and only 8 percent have an advanced degree. More than 85 percent of the teachers grew up in or near the town, and the school’s annual turnover rate hovers close to 30 percent. Even with its additional Title II “highly qualified” teacher funds, a school like this cannot compete effectively in the teacher labor market.

Administrators in rural districts cited low salaries as one reason for their difficulties. One rural superintendent told us he was “ashamed” that his district only offered a 3 percent salary supplement above the state salary schedule.

Even when districts offered signing bonuses, they found these incentives insufficient to attract and retain highly qualified teachers. One rural district in Alabama offered a \$5,000 signing bonus for any person, including principals, teachers and administrative staff, willing to work there. Central office staff told us that to ensure the bonus worked, they could only require recipients work two years. Most teachers take the bonus, serve their two years, and leave.

Most administrators we spoke with did not know how to recruit highly qualified candidates in this competitive marketplace. A principal in a rural county just outside a metropolitan area told us: “Last year, I had to hire seven new teachers. When I called them, they interviewed me! They asked, ‘How many subjects would I be teaching? When will my prep be? Do I have to sponsor any clubs?’ You have to sell your school. Schools that are new ... and that have money ... have huge advantages over us. What am I to do?”

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Urban districts face the additional challenge of finding teachers who are prepared to work with few resources and students with dramatically different learning and emotional needs. We met a human resource director looking to fill 800 vacancies annually in a district with predominately poor students of color. His district competes with county schools that have primarily white, middle- to upper-class students. When the two districts offer the same pay, this administrator said that candidates often sign with the county schools.

Many hard-to-staff schools respond to teacher shortages by hiring alternatively licensed teachers. Because NCLB considers these teachers highly qualified, districts can meet the requirements of the law and still not improve the quality of teaching in their schools. With few exceptions, principals and teachers told us that NCLB has had little impact on either the quality of the teacher pool as a whole or the district assignment policies.

Our case studies revealed that one of the central goals of NCLB—ensuring that poor students and students of color have equal access to effective teachers—remains largely out of reach. Targeted federal programs, similar to initiatives that attract doctors to high-need communities, are needed to recruit and retain quality teachers to these schools.

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FINDING 3

SAME APPROACHES WILL LEAD TO THE SAME RESULTS

Schools and Districts Need Customized Guidance, Technical Assistance, and Resources

“I can remember [our personnel administrators] going to a [state education department] meeting, and it seems like the next day we received something from the state and it was different from what they heard the day before at this meeting. It is all changing so quickly.”
— superintendent, large urban district

Implementing the NCLB highly qualified teacher mandates requires considerable commitment and resources from states and districts to prove teachers’ content knowledge, track the status of highly qualified teachers and communicate this information to the public, and recruit highly qualified teachers. The administrators we interviewed believed that the federal government could reduce the burden on states and districts by providing clearer and more consistent guidance and more timely technical assistance.

Nearly two years after passage of NCLB, the principals and administrators we spoke with still had many questions regarding “gray areas” of the highly qualified provisions.

Nearly two years after passage of the law, the principals and administrators we spoke with still had many questions regarding “gray areas” of the highly qualified provisions, including deciding which higher education courses should count toward academic requirements; understanding highly qualified requirements for teaching core subject areas to special education students; communicating with parents regarding the highly qualified status of teachers; and understanding the potential punitive elements of the law for failing to meet the mandate.

Many district officials told us that changing guidance from their states about the highly qualified teacher definition made it difficult to know what and when to tell principals and teachers about how best to meet the mandate. Many administrators feared telling teachers one thing, having them begin a class or take a test, and then having the requirements change soon after. Several district administrators also reported receiving only one day of training from the state about issues regarding highly qualified teachers, too little time to understand fully the details of the law.

States are caught in a bind. In addition to the lack of technical assistance from the federal government, fiscal constraints make it difficult for states to provide guidance to help districts think differently about how to use federal monies to comply with NCLB. Budget deficits leave few state dollars available to help improve teaching quality. We found schools and districts

struggling to pay for the additional costs of “high quality professional development” for all teachers, support for paraprofessionals to become highly qualified, administrative costs associated with the parental notification requirements of the law, and upgrades to data and technical infrastructures used to document teachers’ highly qualified status.

Title II of NCLB provides states and districts with almost \$3 billion to improve educator quality. The Title II funds, formerly comprised of monies for class size reduction and professional development in math and science, now can be used largely at the district’s discretion to improve teacher quality. Despite the new flexibility, however, most of the districts we studied were using Title II money much the same as always, with some districts using as much as 80 percent of their Title II dollars for class size reduction.

The funding issues were especially noteworthy in rural districts, which require more resources than their urban and suburban counterparts because of geographic isolation, higher proportions of unqualified teachers, and limited access to universities and consultants. For example, because the fixed costs involved in hiring consultants and paying for substitute teachers vary only slightly from large urban to small rural districts, small districts must use a much greater percentage of their federal funds for these purposes.

NCLB relies on states and districts to use their existing money in different ways, but many states and districts do not know how to do this effectively. Districts need more guidance and technical assistance on how to implement and fund the teaching quality mandates and professional development provisions of the law.

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Counting “Highly Qualified” Teachers May Not Be as Easy as “1-2-3”

“When I arrived, no one could tell me how many teachers in the district met the [highly qualified] requirements. Our district did not begin building a database to track this information until January 2004.”

—human resources director, urban district

NCLB requires states and districts to collect and report data in an annual report card on “the professional qualifications of teachers in the state, the percentage of such teachers teaching with emergency or provisional credentials, and the percentage of classes in the state not taught by highly qualified teachers, in the aggregate and disaggregated by high-poverty compared to low-poverty schools.”⁵

Our research found that few states or districts are equipped to handle this data collection and reporting task. The data are not readily available, and the systems to house the data are not in place. District leaders told us stories of numerous hours spent pouring over paper files; searching for copies of transcripts, certificates, and test scores; and asking teachers to search for documentation that might be 20 years old.

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SECTQ teacher surveys revealed that high proportions of teachers did not know if they were considered highly qualified as late as spring 2004. In one-third of the schools we visited, at least 30 percent of teachers did not know their highly qualified status. At one school, the number of teachers who did not know their status was as high as 63 percent.

In the first state reports on highly qualified teachers in August 2003, the four states in our study reported wide variations in the percentage of classes taught by highly qualified teachers, both in the aggregate and in high-poverty schools. For example, Georgia claimed that 94 percent of their teachers were highly qualified, while Alabama and Tennessee reported 35 percent and 34 percent, respectively.

These variations were largely due to wide discrepancies in states' capabilities to track the data. Many relied on approximations instead of hard numbers. In Alabama, we were told that state and district officials have been counting the numbers of highly qualified teachers by hand. Local officials completed a checklist for different criteria to identify highly qualified teachers, and then six state department employees verified the checklists for the state's 48,000 teachers.

Although Georgia is using a new database that matches teachers' certification areas with the areas to which they are assigned, teachers reported that data inaccuracies caused panic among veteran teachers who were told prematurely that they might not be highly qualified. There also are inaccuracies due to teachers having new certificates that are not yet reflected in the system, or because the subject areas in which teachers are shown to teach do not accurately reflect the classes they are teaching.

The federal government has placed very little emphasis on helping state and local agencies build their teaching quality data infrastructures, although a major focus of the highly qualified teacher mandates involve districts and states accurately collecting and reporting data. States must implement dramatically different methods and systems that will yield valid and reliable data to identify highly qualified teachers.

The Demand for Professional Development Is High, but Confusion and Dwindling Resources Are Hampering Efforts

"Twenty-six years ago when I first became a principal, the state department of education provided a lot of on-site help to novice teachers and administrators. That does not exist anymore. They do not have the personnel. Professional development for my folks is 100 percent my responsibility, and I cannot do it all."

—superintendent, rural district

NCLB seeks to "significantly elevate the quality of instruction by providing staff in participating schools with substantial opportunities for professional development."⁶ The law calls for districts to assess the knowledge and skills teachers and principals need to help diverse students meet academic standards.

The need for such professional development is great. We found many teachers who are ill-prepared to help their students and many schools that are ill-equipped to design learning opportunities for them. In one urban elementary school we visited, 79 percent of teachers taught limited English proficient students, but only 11 percent reported participating in training during the last three years in how to teach these students. Similarly, gaps between teachers who taught students on individualized education plans (IEPs) and those who received training ranged from a low of 17 percent to a high of 79 percent.

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Overall, we found little knowledge of the high quality professional development provisions among teachers, principals and district administrators. When asked what information they had received about these requirements, the answer was most often “none” or “very little.” In fact, district professional development coordinators often asked us what the law said about this issue. Few district administrators had a plan for how to document teachers’ participation in high quality professional development.

Administrators also expressed serious concerns about the federal government’s push for scientifically based professional development, which they feared would result in “canned” programs sold by a favored vendor. A teacher worried that her district, in the name of only paying for scientifically based professional development, would eliminate teacher leadership roles and allow fewer opportunities for her and her colleagues to attend one-day or short-term training to help them understand standards, curriculum, and accountability.

School and district officials also expressed concern about their capacity to provide high quality professional development. An inner-city elementary school principal told us that she would love to create a more flexible schedule to support professional development during the school day, but she did not know how. In one rural district, eight central office staff must serve the needs of 250 teachers, seven schools, and 2,500 students. The district is at least 90 miles from the nearest university, limiting access to professional consultants, and the district’s lack of technology restricts access to distance learning opportunities.

Because professional development has traditionally been a local control issue, there is little precedent for states to create and enforce professional development standards. Many of the states’ departments of education have been downsized recently, and there are few resources to serve these schools.

In districts with ample resources, the NCLB professional development requirements are at least causing conversation to begin about the types of in-service training and support that teachers need. Some district administrators said that the law has pushed them to look at data, focus on their specific needs, and target resources in those areas.

SECTQ recommends that the federal government provide states and districts with more guidance and resources so that targeted and effective professional development can be realized by all schools.

Leadership, Money, and Community Support Is Key to Long-term Success

“Now, we have to be honest about who’s licensed to teach. And I think that we haven’t always been accountable for making sure that our poorest kids and poorest schools have had the most highly qualified teachers. Parents didn’t know and we didn’t tell them.”

—superintendent, large urban district

There is no question that the NCLB highly qualified teacher mandates have sharpened the focus of central office administrators and principals in their efforts to recruit and retain exceptional teachers. They told us NCLB was forcing them to consider more seriously teacher assignments, not only in certain schools but also within particular subject areas. Leaders in rural

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districts reported that the law empowered them to prevent patronage practices, a holdover in smaller communities in which the district is the largest employer. And some said principals are now reviewing college and professional development transcripts much more thoroughly and are “shopping more wisely.”

We consistently heard that the law was pushing teachers to teach in their fields of expertise and more deeply understand the value of continuous professional development. Some teachers and administrators also anticipated that the new requirements would drive out ineffective veteran teachers, who have little desire to complete coursework or pass a test. Administrators and teachers also believed that NCLB may prompt teacher education programs to emphasize more content knowledge for prospective teachers, especially at the middle school level.

Finally, a few interviewees believed that enforcing a public standard for all teachers to meet could improve the public perception of teaching and instill a sense of pride and ownership in the teaching profession.

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For example, we visited a mid-sized urban district with about \$2 million in its Title II budget for 1,500 teachers that created a system for every teacher to have an individual learning plan (ILP). These plans help ensure that all K–3 teachers participate in balanced literacy training, all teachers in grades 4–8 train in middle grades literacy, and all high school teachers work on reading in the content areas. To assist those middle school math and science teachers who do not have content expertise in their teaching assignment, the district is paying for approved courses in each of the fields.

Because the district hires many alternative route teachers, they emphasize the development of teaching skills in their required professional development offerings, including workshops in understanding poverty and analyzing data. The district also works with a nearby university to offer an urban teaching endorsement and a number of teacher leadership opportunities that support National Board Certification.

Title VI class-size reduction funds are used to enable specially trained veteran teachers to work with lesser prepared teachers for six months to a year. New teachers receive extensive support and assistance, and both mentor and mentee teachers receive a stipend for working together and doing extra professional development during the year. The program, which was launched four years ago and predates NCLB, supports eight to 10 new participating teachers each year and has a 97 percent retention rate.

We also visited one urban district that had developed a successful effort to recruit more accomplished teachers into the area's low-performing schools. Largely funded by a coordinated set of multimillion dollar grants from local foundations, the district provided financial incentives for teachers that included free tuition toward a master's degree; a \$10,000 loan toward a down payment on a house near one of the schools, forgivable if the teacher remains in the school for a minimum of five years; \$2,000 for every teacher that boosted overall test scores by a significant degree; and a \$5,000 annual bonus. As a result of the initiative, staffing vacancies have

decreased dramatically, the applicant pool is much stronger, and student achievement rates are improving.

Finally, in a large urban system, with more than 7,000 teachers and 100,000 students, we discovered an extraordinary attempt to draw on National Board Certified Teachers to serve in hard-to-staff schools with the district's most challenging students. These expert teachers mentor new or struggling teachers, diagnose students' learning problems, and use their classrooms as models for observation. They can earn up to \$2,500 in additional salary per year and additional pay if they meet performance goals. The schools have smaller classes and additional staff, and local universities offer specialized master's programs to the schools' teachers. Student achievement is increasing, and schools with expert principals no longer suffer from high teacher turnover rates.

This effort, which predates NCLB, was built from strong district-level leadership, buy-in and support from several local community and activist groups, and a ready supply of accomplished teachers who were willing to move across town to teach more challenging students.

However, the conditions that exist in these two more progressive communities are not evident in the rural school districts studied. These examples demonstrate that meeting NCLB requirements with the current level of funding made available by the federal government is insufficient to improve teaching quality. States and districts need to focus on more comprehensive, innovative efforts to recruit and retain high quality teachers for all students.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Much needs to be done from the classroom to the Capitol to ensure that NCLB helps all students get the knowledgeable teachers they need and deserve.

This new federal role requires clear, consistent guidance and assistance to states and sufficient resources to ensure that the requirements can be met.

Federal Government

NCLB represents an unprecedented role for the federal government in educating the nation's children. This new role requires clear and consistent guidance and assistance to states, as well as sufficient funding to ensure districts can meet the requirements.

- NCLB must be amended to focus not only on teachers' content knowledge but also on their ability to teach it by requiring preparation and performance based assessment *before* a teacher is considered highly qualified.
- Title II allocations, like many state funding formulas, should include additional monies to ensure that small rural districts have sufficient funds to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers.
- The Medical Manpower Act of the 1950s and the Health Professions Education Assistance Act in 1963 demonstrated a significant investment in and comprehensive response to shortages in the medical field, creating preparation programs and incentives to work in hard-to-staff areas of the country. A similar commitment is necessary for teachers. Proposed legislation such as the Teacher Mentoring Act (H.R. 1611), Teaching Fellows Act (H.R. 1805), and aspects of the Ready to Teach Act (H.R. 2211) that create Centers of Excellence, if passed, could be a good start toward the long-term investment necessary to assist states and districts in finding high quality teachers.

State Government

States play a critical role in ensuring teaching quality, setting standards for the profession, and developing licensing requirements. State policies and NCLB requirements must work with each other rather than against each other.

- States should only use the minimal requirements of the federal highly qualified definition as a starting point for discussions on what teaching quality looks like, how to assess it, and how to prepare new candidates and support existing teachers to reach the highest standards. States should not offer reciprocity to "highly qualified" teachers from other states without a thorough analysis to ensure that those standards are of equal rigor.

- Districts need assistance in developing new policies and programs to improve teaching quality and implementing NCLB. State assistance to schools and districts should ensure that innovative and successful approaches are thoroughly detailed, best practices are systematically shared, and assistance in implementation is provided.
- States need to invest strategically in a combination of incentives to recruit and retain teachers for hard-to-staff and low performing schools. These programs should include building a critical mass of accomplished teachers in these schools, intensive induction programs, and better working conditions.
- States should collect more comprehensive data on a range of teacher recruitment, preparation, and professional development efforts, as well as teacher working conditions to assess progress on building a high quality teacher development system.

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Local School Districts

Ultimately, the success of NCLB's efforts to place a highly qualified teacher in every classroom falls squarely on the shoulders of local districts that control virtually all of the federal educator quality funds.

- Districts must first understand how local, state, and federal dollars used to enhance teaching quality are being spent. They must then analyze current practices to determine what, if any, reforms are necessary.
- Districts need to focus on addressing recruitment and retention challenges with an emphasis on quality, not on meeting the mandates of NCLB. If districts focus on teaching quality—recruiting or developing well prepared teachers and investing in their continued professional growth—the highly qualified requirements will be met.
- Districts must place teaching quality at the center of school improvement strategies if they expect schools to meet adequate yearly progress. Data on teacher supply, demand, and turnover will be essential to monitoring the success of these strategies.

Ultimately, the success of NCLB's efforts to place a highly qualified teacher in every classroom falls squarely on the shoulders of local districts that control virtually all of the federal educator quality funds.

In the end, it will take nothing less than a concerted and coordinated effort of the federal government, states, and districts to overhaul the way we recruit, license, induct, and support teachers to ensure that we have not only a highly qualified teacher but also high quality teaching in every classroom, every day.

ENDNOTES

1. For example, see Education Trust (2003). *In Need of Improvement: Ten Ways the U.S. Department of Education Has Failed to Live Up to Its Teacher Quality Commitments*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Education Policy (2003). *From the Capitol to the Classroom: State and Federal Efforts to Implement the No Child Left Behind Act*. Washington, D.C.

2. The No Child Left Behind Act also defines how this competence may be demonstrated, which differs for teachers of different grade levels and for veteran versus new teachers. Briefly, new secondary teachers must demonstrate subject matter competence by either passing a rigorous subject exam or possessing an academic major or equivalent coursework, graduate degree, or advanced certification or credentialing in the subject taught. New elementary school teachers must pass a rigorous test of subject matter and teaching skills in reading, writing, math, and other basic areas of the elementary curriculum. Veteran teachers may demonstrate subject competence through these same options or by meeting an objective, uniform standard set by the state to determine subject competency. See: U.S. Department of Education. (2002); No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (H.R. 1), 107.

3. Georgia Professional Standards Commission. Georgia TAPP Program Performance at <http://www.gapsc.com/gatapp/download/gatappall.pdf>.

4. See U.S. Department of Education (2004); *Improving Teacher Quality State Grants Title II, Part A; Non-Regulatory Guidance*, p. 10 at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/teacherqual/guidance.pdf>.

5. See U.S. Department of Education (2003); *Report Cards, Title I, Part A; Non-Regulatory Guidance*, p. 9 at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/reportcardsguidance.doc>.

6. See U.S. Department of Education (2002); No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (H.R. 1) Sec. 1001 (10), 107.



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