

10



JOBS IN ONE!



Scientist, coach, computer whiz...teaching is many professions rolled into one. We asked *Instructor* readers what it really takes to be “highly qualified.” **By Caralee Adams**

How do you define good teaching? What makes a teacher “highly-qualified?” For many of us, the answer is “we know it when we see it.” We know how we feel about our own teaching, or that of a teacher-friend down the hall, but we find it hard to set a list of criteria. Like good parenting, good teaching is hard to quantify. It depends on your educational philosophy, on your background, and your experience. It depends on where you teach and who you teach, and on the resources available to you. In short, it depends on a whole lot.

The question, however, has never been more pressing. This school year is the NCLB deadline for ensuring that all teachers in U.S. public schools are “highly qualified.” (For more on NCLB, see page 47.) With the deadline fast approaching, *Instructor* set out to ask teachers how they define great teaching. It’s a complicated question—and a personal one for any teacher, whether you’re a newbie or a veteran. And your answers were so multifaceted, it was clear that teaching comprises much more than one job.

BEYOND CREDENTIALS

Teachers we talked to felt that being a great teacher is about much more than having official credentials. It’s about having a calling for teaching; about emotionally connecting with kids; about constantly customizing and improvising to meet each student’s individual needs.

“I think a teacher can look really good on paper for NCLB, but not have what it takes to be a great teacher,” says Liza Mathews, a kindergarten teacher for 12 years in Corte Madera, California. “Some of the qualities are intangible—heart, passion, and a conscientious attitude. They can’t be measured.”

“So many people have a simplistic view of teaching—that teaching is telling and learning is listening,” says Barnett Berry, president and founder of the

Center for Teaching Quality in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He adds that NCLB focuses on what teachers know, while overlooking the importance of teaching methods. “Teachers should be assessed not only with paper-and-pencil tests, but also through classroom visits.”

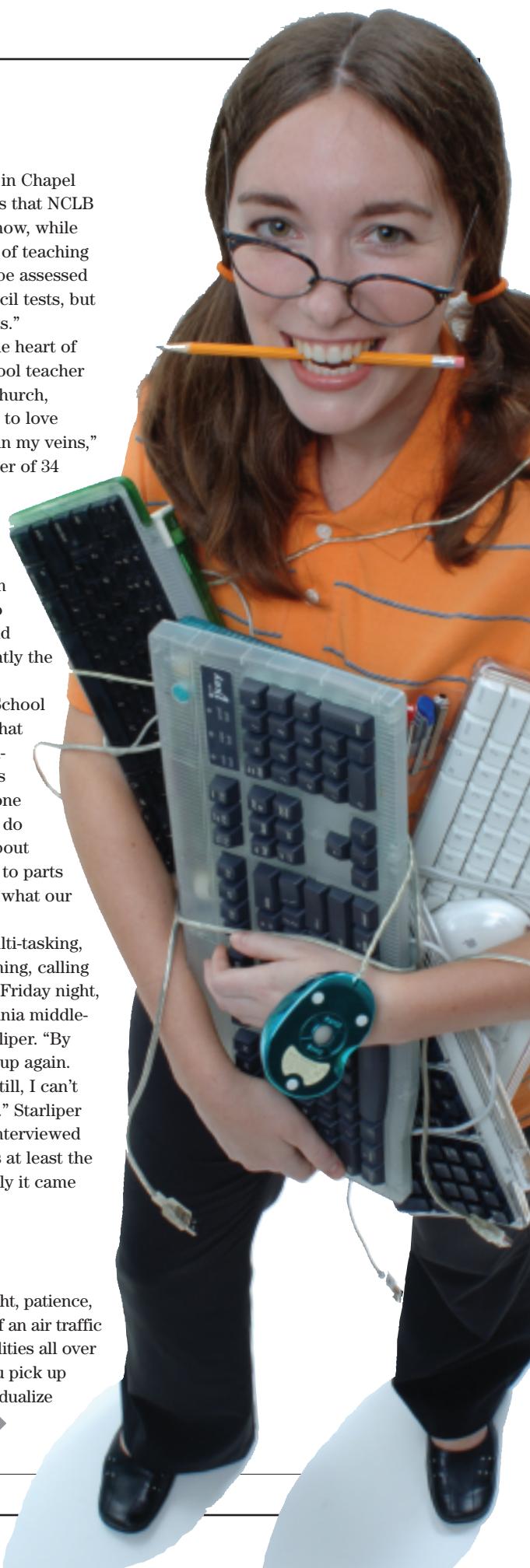
Credentials don’t get at the heart of teaching, agrees middle-school teacher Patricia Dancho of Spring Church, Pennsylvania. You first have to love school. “I’ve got chalk dust in my veins,” says the language-arts teacher of 34 years. “If you don’t feel that way, don’t teach. You aren’t doing your kids or yourself any justice.”

Principal Susan Masterson of Janesville, Wisconsin also sees passion for teaching and children as essential. Currently the president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, Masterson says that when she’s hiring new teachers, she always asks, “What’s the best thing that you’ve done for a child that you’d like to do again?” She explains, “It’s about having empathy, connecting to parts of the students’ lives...that’s what our strongest teachers do.”

Teaching goes beyond multi-tasking, teachers said; it’s all-consuming, calling upon every part of you. “By Friday night, I’m drained,” said West Virginia middle-school teacher Barbara Starliper. “By midday Sunday, I’m gearing up again. There’s so much going on. Still, I can’t imagine doing anything else.” Starliper and the other teachers we interviewed agreed—teaching comprises at least the following 10 jobs (now if only it came with all those salaries)!

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER

Great teachers have the insight, patience, and forward-thinking skills of an air traffic controller. With students’ abilities all over the map, it is critical that you pick up on the differences and individualize curriculum accordingly. >>



PHOTOS: JAMES LEVIN



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“Teaching is rocket science,” says Liza Mathews. “It is incredibly complex and requires phenomenal skills.”

means that teachers have a tougher job and their skills have to be that much stronger, adds Darling-Hammond.

For example, various strategies are used to accommodate different learning styles. “In a great classroom, there will be small-group discussions, large-group activities, and writing in journals to give the teacher insight into what students are thinking and feeling. The teacher will be taking notes on what each kid thinks and says to find out what works, and will then build on those strengths,” says Darling-Hammond.

PUBLIC RELATIONS EXPERT

Teachers are engaged in the PR business, many say. You must communicate effectively with a variety of constituencies.

“The number-one thing for great teachers is the ability to relate well to people,” says Susan Illgen, a former Grove, Oklahoma, kindergarten teacher and now early-childhood coordinator for the state. Well-loved and respected teachers understand human nature and have positive relationships with peers, parents, and administrators.

Teachers who exemplify this quality are those who go beyond sending notes and e-mails home, says Principal Masterson. “Our great teachers do things like go on a Saturday morning to children’s soccer games or organize a classroom potluck,” she says. Others have lunch with their students. They work to connect with kids, motivate them, and help them understand their own learning processes on a deeper level.

Schools are now more client-oriented, adds Katherine James, a recently retired Washington, D.C., principal. Teachers must be diplomats and listen to parents. “Teachers can’t say, ‘My word is the law.’ They may have to negotiate,” says James. Effective teachers sandwich negative feedback with positive comments and learn to handle all kinds of parents from the involved to the disenfranchised.

ROCKET SCIENTIST

“Teaching *is* rocket science,” says Liza Mathews of California. “It is incredibly complex and requires phenomenal skills across many disciplines.” Today’s great teachers keep up with the latest brain research and use scientifically researched methods in their curriculum. They know the best strategies to work with students from different backgrounds and with special needs.

With the increase in standardized testing in schools, you need to understand how to analyze test scores and see where students make mistakes. Then, you can differentiate the curriculum and cluster students who need intensive work in certain areas.

Researchers are revealing more and more about how people learn; keeping up with those advances is vital to connecting with students. Knowing how different people learn in different ways is like “having the key to open a castle,” says Darling-Hammond. “If teachers don’t have the key, they are just beating their heads against the wall.” When teachers don’t understand learning theories it is like a doctor not understanding anatomy, she adds. It’s becoming more and more critical.

STAND-UP COMEDIAN

Every speaker knows that humor grabs the attention of the audience. “I try to lighten up and make learning fun,” says Tessie Adams Domangue, a second-grade teacher in Houma, Louisiana, who was named Louisiana Teacher of the Year in 2005. “I play music and dance to a two-minute song in the middle of a long lesson,” she says. “It makes a difference. They need a little outburst of energy.”

After an endless stream of requests for a pencil loan from her sixth graders, one day Dancho decided to dress up as a “pencil tree,” taping pencils all over her clothes. It was all the students talked about for days. “You have to be a little

This takes time and knowledge. “Teachers need to know how to meet kids where they are,” says Berry. “Effective teachers use many tools to assess how students learn as well as what they know.”

Teaching is much more demanding than it was 20 years ago, and the expectation for student learning is higher, says Linda Darling-Hammond, professor of education at Stanford University and co-editor of *A Good Teacher in Every Classroom: Preparing the Highly Qualified Teachers Our Children Deserve* (2005), sponsored by the National Academy of Education.

Recent changes in the economy mean that all children need to master critical thinking to be prepared for a more complex workplace. At the same time, schools are more diverse with students in special education, those whose second language is English, and others with needs unmet by their families. This

bit crazy yourself,” she says. “You have to go with the flow.”

LIFE-LONG LEARNER

A sincere interest in learning and professional growth is a must for teachers who want to keep up with and inspire students. “How can teachers turn children into lifelong learners if they are not lifelong learners themselves?” asks Berry.

Although it can be overwhelming at times, great teachers have a stack of teacher books by their beds and are constantly working to improve their skills.

Learning needs to be targeted and meaningful to keep up with the changing culture and student population. This means finding professional development opportunities to expand your knowledge

of various subjects, technology, special accommodations, and ESL. It also means networking with and observing other teachers to learn new strategies.

TEAM PLAYER (WITH A GREAT COACH)

Like a member of a sports team, you have to work together with your col-

leagues to be a winner. Great teachers collaborate with their peers, are open to suggestions, and often switch tactics to adopt the best practices.

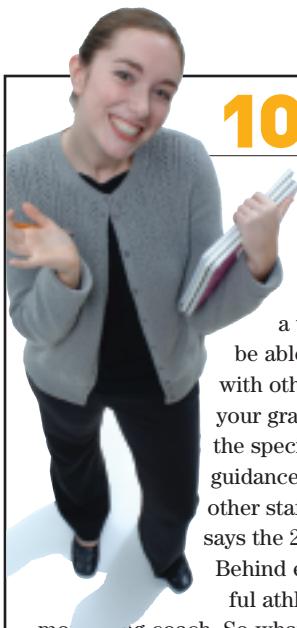
“There was a time when a teacher would go into a classroom and could close the door, only communicating with the children and the principal,” says Nancy Moga, an elementary-school 

how NCLB defines “highly-qualified”

Under provisions of the 2001 federal education law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), all teachers in U.S. public schools must be deemed highly-qualified by 2005–2006 (with certain exceptions). A highly-qualified public school teacher must have: **1**) a bachelor’s degree; **2**) full state certification or licensure; and **3**) prove competency in each subject they teach. The law requires states to track “teacher quality” and adopt plans to ensure that all teachers become highly qualified, emphasizing schools serving poor and minority students. With the focus on content knowledge, the law recognizes teachers from a variety of alternative certification programs as highly qualified.

Middle and high school teachers must show that they have mastered the subject they teach. This can be achieved by **1**) having a major in the subject you teach or credits equivalent to a major; **2**) passing a standardized test of content knowledge; **3**) earning advanced certification from the state or a graduate degree or **4**) if you are a current teacher, you may qualify with a combination of teaching experience, professional development, and knowledge in the subject gained over time.

Island Right



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principal in Covington, Virginia. “Now you have to be a team player—to be able to cooperate with other teachers at your grade level, with the special-ed teacher, guidance counselor, and other staff members,” says the 20-year veteran. Behind every successful athlete is usually a motivating coach. So what do teachers say makes a great principal? “Someone who is honest, caring, supportive, and fair,” says Pam Boh, a first-grade teacher for 20 years in Columbus, Ohio. “A principal can make or break a cohesive staff. The atmosphere is based on how the principal guides the staff.”

Adds Mathews, “A great principal really has to lead with integrity—that is critical. If trust and respect aren’t there, there won’t be a strong and healthy professional relationship.”

COMPUTER WHIZ

Today’s students have been at the computer keyboard since they were children. No doubt you have seen that they are technology whizzes and want to be entertained in a fast-paced environment. Gone are the days of asking students to open to a page in a book and follow along. Now you have to be on the cutting edge of technology. If you are not a computer genius, you at least have to be willing to learn—and sometimes that means from your students.

Teachers, such as Domangue, use PowerPoint presentations, DVDs, educational computer games, and interactive lessons to get kids engaged. “We can’t think of ourselves: what would interest *me* in that. We have to think of what would excite a child,” she says.

At Alan Michelson’s elementary school in Blue Spring, Missouri, teachers gradually are getting SMART Boards—interactive white boards—in their classrooms. “It makes students become part of the learning, rather than sitting there,” says the principal of 17 years.

COUNSELOR

Just as a counselor has to see beyond the surface, great teaching means being insightful and flexible. Everyone has seen their best-laid lesson plans fizzle midway through class. Great teachers pick up when students aren’t following along, make adjustments, and think on their feet. Sometimes that means attending to emotional needs of students first.

When Karen Heath, a Vermont Teacher of the Year for 2005 sees red faces coming in from recess, she knows to delay the lesson for 10 minutes and allow some silent reading while the students settle down. >>

What is your biggest challenge?

We asked over 500 Instructor readers: What is the most difficult part of your job?

36% of our readers say their #1 challenge is finding “time to get everything done.”

30% say it’s differentiation: “meeting the needs of individual students.”

10% cite the pressures of “testing requirements” brought about by NCLB.

Obstacles to student success?

When asked what stands between their lowest performing students and academic success, teachers cited complex causes.

38% say it’s “skills below grade level” that leave children struggling to catch up.

35% say it’s a wider cultural problem, citing a “lack of family involvement.”

6% cite insufficient or unequal school funding as a primary cause.

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In a more serious situation, when a tragedy struck her school this spring and three students died in a drowning accident, she knew that things couldn't go on as usual in her classroom. For those able to concentrate, Heath provided work. She created space for others to grieve or express their grief through writing. "I had to allow for the emotional needs of

the students," she says.

Not all kids come to school with a hug from a parent or a full tummy. Before they can learn, students must first feel they are in a good and safe place. "Some of my kids are starved for you to just listen to them—to make them matter in your life for a few minutes," says Barbara Starliper. She tries to

understand her students' perspectives as they try to learn new vocabulary words every week. "If I had to learn 50 new terms in a week, I'd be overwhelmed. You have to have a genuine concern for them."

MANAGER

Very little learning takes place in a classroom that doesn't have a stellar manager. The ability to plan, organize, and carry out a lesson is key. It's important to provide a strong curriculum with tasks that engage students in active learning and build a classroom community. Great managers know that employees are most productive when they are happy. And students want to perform when they feel safe and cared for by their teacher.

"If a teacher really connects with and

Island Left

What Effective Teachers Do

According to research cited in *A Good Teacher in Every Classroom: Preparing the Highly Qualified Teachers Our Children Deserve* (2005), effective teachers:

... **USE MANY TOOLS** to assess how their students learn

... **CAREFULLY ORGANIZE** activities based on students' knowledge so they can be successful

... **DESIGN CURRICULUM** to support each step of students' learning and to confront confusion or misinterpretations

... **CUSTOMIZE CURRICULUM** to different students' needs

... **ENGAGE STUDENTS** in active learning, like debating, discussing and researching

... **MAKE EXPECTATIONS** for high-quality work very clear by providing models for standards and constant feedback

... **DESIGN AND MANAGE** a well-functioning and respectful classroom, allowing students to work productively

... **INVOLVE PARENTS** in the learning process

... **COLLABORATE WITH OTHER TEACHERS** and administrators to create a seamless curriculum and a supportive environment.

“Present yourself in a way that is real,” says Tessie Domangue. “Children see right through facades.”

loves the children, and the children really like the teacher, then you will have a well-functioning classroom,” says Masterson. “It’s not about rules, it’s about relationships.”

Great teachers will learn something personal about each of the students from day one, such as the name of their pet. They will keep up on popular culture by seeing recent kids’ movies, listening to pop music, and reading children’s books. Once a connection is made and a rapport is established, children often behave because they don’t want to disappoint the teacher.

YOURSELF

We’ve all experienced the sheer exhaustion of trying to be everything to

everyone. Great teachers, above all, act like themselves in the classroom.

“Present yourself in a way that is real,” says Domangue. “Don’t put on a mask. You can’t pretend you are in a good mood. Children see clearly through a facade.” When you present yourself as human, children can learn from seeing how you cope. “We laugh, we cry, we sing, because it is all part of life,” she says. “I can’t be a robot in the classroom. I want to show them how to handle setbacks and difficult emotions.”

Authentic teachers will share their personal hobbies or bring their own children to school events to show their students another dimension of their lives.

Teachers can be authority figures and supportive at the same time, says

Principal James. “It’s like being a second parent. I always tell my kids, ‘I am your daytime mom.’”

AND THE LIST GOES ON...

When you think of the many hats you wear at school, what would you add? Perhaps bulletin board designer, professional organizer, snack chef, maid, musician, family counselor, special-events coordinator, fundraiser, or cheerleader tops your list.

Oklahoma’s Illgen says that the way highly qualified teachers are defined is evolving, and it is good for the profession to be pushed to improve. “Teachers I meet desperately want to do their best. They are always seeking,” says the 36-year-old elementary-school teacher. “As long as we desire to do our best, we will move forward.” □

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