



The “No Child Left Behind” Definition of Highly Qualified Teachers: Summary and Principal Ideas from a Roundtable Discussion

November 29, 2006

Background and Purpose

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act requires states to ensure that all teachers of core academic subjects are highly qualified according to the Act’s definition. To meet this definition, teachers generally must have a bachelors’ degree, be fully certified, and demonstrate their knowledge and skills in the subjects they are teaching by having sufficient academic coursework in their field or by passing a state test. In addition, veteran teachers who lack the required academic coursework can demonstrate their competence in the subjects they teach by complying with standards of the uniform system developed by their state to evaluate teacher quality under NCLB.

In a March 2006 report on NCLB by the Center on Education Policy (CEP),* 88% of school districts surveyed by CEP reported that they were on track to meet the highly qualified teacher requirements by the end of school year 2005-06, the original deadline. (The U.S. Department of Education has since given states an extra year to comply if they are making a good faith effort.) The majority of districts, however, expressed skepticism that this requirement has actually improved the quality of teaching. Further, states and districts reported having difficulty in meeting the highly qualified requirements for some teachers, such as special education teachers, high school math and science teachers, or teachers in rural areas who teach multiple subjects.

On November 29, 2006, CEP convened representatives from 23 organizations in Washington, D.C. to discuss NCLB’s highly qualified teacher definition. These organizations and many others were invited to participate if they had concrete, written proposals for how the Act’s definition of highly qualified teachers could be improved. At the session, participants discussed their proposals. Participating organizations are listed in the box below. Staff from the offices of several members of Congress also attended this meeting.

This document summarizes the proposals and discussions that emerged from this roundtable session. It is also intended to share ideas for improving the highly qualified teacher definition

* Center on Education Policy, *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act*, 2006.

with officials in the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Congress, and the education community. This document was developed by CEP staff and has not been approved or specifically endorsed by any of the participating organizations.

Organizations Participating in the November 29, 2006, Roundtable Discussion

1. American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education
2. American Association of School Personnel Administrators
3. American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence
4. American Federation of Teachers
5. Association of Teacher Educators
6. Campaign for Educational Equity, Teachers College
7. Center for American Progress
8. Center for Teaching Quality
9. Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights
10. The Education Trust
11. National Association of Elementary School Principals
12. National Association of Secondary School Principals
13. National Association of State Boards of Education
14. National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
15. National Commission on Teaching and America's Future
16. National Council for the Social Studies
17. National Council on Teacher Quality
18. National Education Association
19. National Middle School Association
20. National School Boards Association
21. New Teacher Center at UC Santa Cruz
22. Phi Delta Kappa International
23. Teach for America

To structure the roundtable session, the Center on Education Policy asked participating organizations to submit proposals in advance with their ideas for improving NCLB's highly qualified teacher definition. Most of these proposals can be accessed under the "meetings" tab of the CEP Web site at www.cep-dc.org. While participating organizations suggested a variety of approaches, many mentioned five general policies that they felt would improve the highly qualified teacher definition:

1. Including a measure of effectiveness in the definition
2. Incorporating flexible or special requirements for some types of teachers
3. Improving teacher preparation, mentoring, and professional development programs
4. Determining appropriate roles for national organizations and federal, state, and local government
5. Strengthening data systems, funding, and research

CEP organized the roundtable discussion around these five themes. During the conversation, participants distilled these themes into three principal ideas for continued discussion:

1. Teacher effectiveness
2. Roles for national organizations and federal, state, and local governments
3. Continued investment in data systems and research on teacher effectiveness

Principal Idea 1: Teacher Effectiveness

In general, participating organizations did not advocate repealing the highly qualified teacher provision of NCLB or question the requirement for teachers to have content knowledge about the subjects they teach. But opinions varied on how to strengthen this provision.

For example, participants disagreed about whether to include a measure of teacher effectiveness based on student learning and achievement in the highly qualified teacher definition. One participant who favored such a measure said that maintaining the current definition was unacceptable. Some groups proposed that teachers' effectiveness could be measured by how much their students learn in one year. Other groups suggested that the measure of teacher effectiveness could be piloted by some of the states participating in the U.S. Department of Education's growth model assessment pilot program. One group said that although states and districts are complying with the current definition, this is not an indicator of improved instruction; in order to move forward, the definition should include some measure of effectiveness.

Other groups said it is too soon to really know whether the highly qualified teacher requirements are affecting student achievement because these types of data will not be available for several years. They advised against expanding the definition to include a measure of teacher effectiveness. Instead, these groups called on the federal government to pursue alternatives, such as requiring schools to report on teacher turnover rates. Some participants thought that the states and the federal government are not effectively implementing the highly qualified teacher provisions; they suggested that the first step should be to better administer the current provision before exploring measures of effectiveness.

A few groups suggested a hybrid system whereby teachers could meet the highly qualified requirement through demonstrated effectiveness. For example, veteran teachers who may not meet all the current requirements in every subject they teach could be considered highly qualified if they can demonstrate they are effective in raising student achievement. Groups argued that this would place a stronger emphasis on teacher effectiveness rather than on credentials alone.

Many groups said the highly qualified classification, as currently defined, is a misnomer because it indicates minimum competency and is too narrow a definition. These groups suggested a tiered classification system wherein teachers would advance from meeting basic qualifications, as mandated by NCLB, to higher levels of proficiency that more clearly identify effectiveness. Conversely, other organizations argued that a tiered classification system would cause uproar among teachers and cautioned that the practical applicability of such systems, which tend to be

complicated, must be thoughtfully examined. One participant commented that this uproar might be tempered or lessened if the tiered system was introduced as an aspiration for some teachers rather than a mandate for all. Practitioners improve with experience, and this growth, some groups argued, should be rewarded through a system with tiered levels of competency.

In this same vein, many organizations suggested that new teachers need more classroom experience and high-quality mentoring before their effectiveness can be measured. Some said that a minimum period of supervised classroom experience and/or demonstrated effectiveness should be required before teachers are given full responsibility for their students. One participant compared teachers to commercial pilots and medical doctors, who are not allowed to fly commercial planes or practice medicine before completing a minimum number of flight hours or residency requirements and demonstrating their proficiency. How, this participant wondered, can we expect teachers to be effective without the same type of clinical experience? Others said that the federal, state and local governments should make investments in high-quality teacher residency programs and better teacher preparation programs.

Finally, some groups called for a stronger emphasis on highly effective schools rather than just highly qualified teachers. One participant said that the current notion of teacher quality is flawed because it focuses on individual accomplishments and requirements rather than on “schools organized for success.” Further, this participant pointed out that “as long as we continue to focus on fixing schools one teacher at a time without looking at attributes of schools as organizations, we won’t get anywhere—schools must be organized for success.” Another participant agreed, pointing out that currently, our inputs in the accountability equation are individual qualifications and our output measure is school performance, which presents a research and accountability quagmire. A few groups even suggested expanding the highly qualified requirements to include school leadership as a means to ensure highly effective principals and leadership staff at every school. But a few other participants opposed this notion.

Principal Idea 2: Roles for National Organizations and Federal, State, and Local Governments

As noted above, many organizations acknowledged the importance of teacher effectiveness in the teacher quality discussion. Still, there was much debate during the roundtable session on the appropriate role for national organizations and the federal, state, and local governments in determining and requiring some measure of teacher effectiveness. Rather than expanding the current NCLB teacher requirements to include a measure of effectiveness, several groups argued that the appropriate role for the federal government through NCLB is to create incentives for states to develop a measure of teacher effectiveness. More specifically, some groups said the federal government should encourage and even fund state pilots to develop teacher effectiveness performance measures in conjunction with student growth models. Others organizations called for federal incentives or block grants to encourage states to develop tiered classification systems. Some groups said the only appropriate federal roles were to gather information, fund data collection systems, provide resources to assist teachers in meeting higher standards, and provide resources for innovative practices within schools. Other groups, by contrast, said that the federal

government should be more aggressive in requiring states to identify elements of teacher effectiveness and demonstrate that teachers are effective.

Some groups called for the creation of national standards for teacher qualifications. One group suggested the federal government fund voluntary national academic standards and provide incentives for states to buy into these standards and align their tests to them. Others suggested a voluntary national licensing/certification exam that would serve as a common measure of teacher qualifications, instead of the current licensure system with 50 different measures. This type of national exam, they maintained, would also help alleviate teacher mobility concerns. Other groups suggested that the federal government should require certification standards to include classroom experience.

Instead of expanding the NCLB qualifications requirements to include school leadership as noted above, one participant suggested that the federal government require schools to report teacher turnover rates in schools. This participant contended that this simple reporting requirement would expose poor leadership, since teachers tend to stay in schools with strong leadership.

Principal Idea 3: Data Systems and Continued Research

Participants in the roundtable session also discussed the importance of data systems and continued research, particularly in relationship to efforts to measure teacher effectiveness. For example, some participants argued that to measure effectiveness we need more research on the attributes, behaviors, and practices of effective teachers. A few groups argued that schools and states do not have the capacity or knowledge to increase teacher effectiveness and student achievement. They noted that the highly qualified teacher definition lacked a teacher effectiveness requirement because people in the field do not know exactly what teacher effectiveness looks like, how to improve it, or how to measure it accurately.

Most participants agreed that the federal government should play a role in improving data collection and expanding research on teacher quality and effectiveness. Some organizations suggested that the federal government provide resources to follow college graduates over time to answer such questions as where teachers come from, where they teach, and how their students perform. An example cited by one participant is the tracking system used by Louisiana's teacher colleges. Some organizations also felt that the federal government should help states to develop data systems that link teachers to students, to make it possible to track the individual effect of teachers on their students' learning. These data systems should also indicate where the most qualified and the minimally qualified teachers are to ensure that poorer schools do not have more minimally qualified teachers than better-funded schools.

Conclusion

In summary, participants in CEP's roundtable discussion focused on three policy areas to improve the NCLB definition of a highly qualified teacher. Most organizations agreed the following elements are important:

1. An effort to measure effective teaching, although some groups argued this effort may not necessarily be appropriate at the federal level
2. Federal incentives to encourage state innovation
3. Continued investment in data systems and research on teacher effectiveness

The Center on Education Policy urges the Congress and U.S. Department of Education officials to consider these recommendations and the specific suggestions submitted by the roundtable participants as they begin their deliberations on reauthorization of No Child Left Behind.

Credits

This meeting summary was researched and written by Jennifer McMurrer, CEP research associate. Nancy Kober, CEP consultant, edited the report. Jack Jennings, CEP's president and CEO, and Diane Stark Rentner, CEP's director of national programs, provided advice and assistance.

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