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Center on Education Policy
Roundtable Discussion on No Child Left Behind Act, November 29, 2006
***Strengthening No Child Left Behind's Teacher Quality Provisions:
Rethinking how we define and measure teacher quality***

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One of the primary challenges to strengthening NCLB's teacher quality provisions is the lack of research evidence about what constitutes a highly effective teacher. In the absence of incontrovertible research evidence, the 'highly qualified' teacher provision in NCLB was constructed with three proxies for teacher quality—state certification, a bachelor's degree, and subject matter knowledge. The overarching problem with this definition is that these proxies cannot and do not differentiate between effective and ineffective teaching practice.

Proxies versus assessing quality teaching in the classroom

While the teacher quality proxies that comprise NCLB's highly qualified definition are among characteristics of high-quality teachers, there is little evidence that such characteristics ensure effectiveness. For example, a high school biology teacher may have a BA in science and be certified, but this is no guarantee that he or she will be an effective teacher. These proxies effectively serve as a minimum requirement to keep out the extremely ill-prepared, but do nothing to measure teaching impact and ensure effective classroom practice.

We rely on such proxies because the educational community has yet to reach a consensus about what constitutes high quality teaching. Many claim that "we know what good teaching looks like," but our schools rely on teacher evaluations that are often completely disconnected from instructional quality or student learning. 78-83% of administrators *self-report* that they do not know how to conduct an effective classroom observation. How are we to judge the quality of a teacher if we cannot come to agreement on what the teacher should and should not be doing? How are we to identify, replicate and teach effective instructional behaviors? What is needed is to drive teacher quality in our schools is a common understanding, and a common language around what quality teaching actually looks like in the classroom. Only then will we be able to determine the definition of a high quality teacher.

Organizations—including the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the New Teacher Center—have developed teaching standards and rubrics of high quality instruction to address this gap in knowledge. These standards articulate many of the elements of effective teaching and how they can be adopted by teachers and assessed in the classroom. However, these standards have rarely been integrated with most local and state systems in ways that support the professional growth of teachers or to help teachers apply them in the classroom. In addition, these standards have never been studied in terms of their relationship to student achievement. With no empirical data linking the standards to student achievement or growth, they may not be reliable for use in accountability 'gatekeeper' measures. However, pending research sponsored by the Education Trust and the New Teacher Center hope to shed new light on this critical relationship.

If federal policymakers are interested in strengthening student achievement by improving teacher quality, they must move beyond minimal credentials and focus on classroom practice itself. After all, that is where the rubber meets the road. The classroom is where teachers teach, children learn, and the real difference is made.

Moving from Minimal Entry Requirements to a Professional Growth Model

The minimum bar set by NCLB serves as an absolute standard. Teachers are deemed either highly qualified or they are not. There is no middle ground and there is no differentiation among ‘highly qualified’ teachers. We contend that it is more realistic to view teaching as a profession characterized by a continuum of growth.

Few teachers are skilled in all the elements of effective teaching; by the same token, very few are incompetent in all of the elements. For example, some teachers may be effective at engaging students and working with parents, but less effective at assessing whether students have actually learned the material. By using an absolute measure to assess teacher quality, we ignore the complexities of teaching and fail to support teachers in becoming more effective practitioners with the proper mentoring and support.

Conceptualizing teaching through a continuum of professional development also allows for the growth of a teacher over time. Research suggests that teachers in their first three years are the least effective in impacting student learning. However, most of the teachers who remain teaching for at least five years will develop their craft over time and become more effective at meeting many student needs and raising student achievement. A growth model allows for differentiation of years of experience, acknowledging that there is a steep learning curve for those just entering the profession, and tailoring supports to meet those needs.

Finally, while an absolute standard supports the identification of teachers who either ‘make the grade’ or ‘don’t’, it does nothing to improve the practice of beginning and veteran teachers in our schools. It is like the teacher who administers only true and false tests because they are easier to grade rather than administering more cumbersome essay exams that ask students to demonstrate their understanding of the complexity of a given subject. In reality, a teacher is not either highly qualified or not qualified; there are many shades of gray between the stark black and white of NCLB’s highly qualified definition.

A New Vision

The New Teacher Center proposes a new vision for teacher quality in our nation. To replace current definitions that serve merely as minimal entry standards into the teaching profession, we instead would focus on a progressive system of *formative assessments* that allow principals, master teachers, mentors, coaches and other support providers to collaboratively determine where teachers fall along a *continuum of teacher development* (such as the one created by the New Teacher Center). The New Teacher Center continuum articulates the elements of effective teaching across the teacher developmental learning curve – specifically outlining what teaching quality looks like in the classroom from the early stages of a career through to what accomplished teaching looks like in the classrooms of our most talented educators. A copy of a page from the Continuum is provided in the Appendix.

The New Teacher Center’s formative assessment system allows mentors and administrators to collect multiple sources of data about an individual teacher’s instructional practice to diagnose his or her strengths and weakness along the continuum, and to inform professional development needs on an individual basis. Formative assessments not only help instructional leaders to identify where teachers are in terms of their professional skill level, but the data is used as a springboard to increase the effectiveness of all teachers. In contrast to NCLB’s static and minimalist definition of teacher quality, formative assessments provide a roadmap for teachers to develop their personal growth and for instructional leaders to nurture the growth of teachers – especially novice educators.

These ideas can be operationalized at the local and state level through a myriad of strategies, including peer-to-peer coaching, principal training in instructional development, and intensive instructional mentoring for new teachers. We at the New Teacher Center believe the latter strategy—new teacher induction—provides the greatest impact on student achievement and holds the greatest promise to provide all students equal access to highly effective teachers.

Recommendations

Building on the above arguments, the New Teacher Center recommends that the NCLB Act **move beyond the minimal ‘highly qualified’ definition of teacher quality to one that captures teacher effectiveness in the classroom.**

- Encourage state integration of professional teaching standards that clearly articulate the elements of effective teaching. Teaching standards should be accompanied with training on how to operationalize them in school settings to improve teacher practice.
- Focus on professional development that helps administrators, evaluators, mentors, and other teacher support providers understand how to accurately assess teaching practice.
- Require data collection and reporting about a broader set of qualifications and characteristics of teachers (e.g., preparation, years of experience, induction experience, impact on student achievement) to inform scientifically-based research about what constitutes highly effective instruction and the overall relationship between teacher quality and student learning.
- Fund evidenced-based teacher induction programs that tie assessment of teacher effectiveness to individualized support for new teachers to move instructional practice forward in the classroom.

Appendix A: Sample page from NTC Continuum of Teacher Development

Engaging and Supporting All Students in Learning

	Beginning	Emerging	Applying	Integrating	Innovating
Connecting students' prior knowledge, life experience, and interests with learning goals	Opens lesson to capture students' attention and interest. Teacher recognizes the value of students' prior knowledge and life experiences.	Asks questions that elicit students' prior knowledge, life experiences and interests. Some connections are made to the learning goals and objectives of the lesson.	Implements activities and elicits questions that help students make connections between what they already know and the learning goals and objectives.	Uses questions and activities to extend students' abilities to integrate what they know with the learning goals and objectives. Makes adjustments during lesson to ensure that all students meet the learning goals.	Creates a context for students to synthesize learning goals and objectives with what they know and develop their own complementary learning goals.
Using a variety of instructional strategies and resources to respond to students' diverse needs	Uses a few instructional strategies. Delivers instruction with available resources and materials.	Varies instruction to increase student participation. Selects strategies, resources, and visuals with some consideration of students' academic and linguistic needs.	Elicits student participation through a variety of instructional strategies intended to match students' academic and linguistic needs. Checks for student understanding.	Uses a repertoire of strategies and resources. Selects and differentiates learning to accommodate students' diverse learning styles.	Uses extensive repertoire of strategies to meet students' diverse academic and linguistic needs and ensure fullest participation and learning for all students.
Facilitating learning experiences that promote autonomy, interaction, and choice	Directs learning experiences through whole group and individual work with possibilities for interaction and choice.	Varies learning experiences to include work in large groups and small groups, with student choice within learning activities.	Provides learning experiences utilizing individual and group structures to develop autonomy and group participation skills. Students make choices about and within their work.	Uses a variety of learning experiences to assist students in developing independent working skills and group participation skills. Supports students in making appropriate choices for learning.	Integrates a variety of challenging learning experiences that develop students' independent learning, collaboration, and choice.

Engaging and Supporting All Students in Learning