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9-1-2004

Highly Qualified Teachers


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Recommended Citation

McKenzie, Sarah C. and Ritter, Gary W., "Highly Qualified Teachers" (2004). *Policy Briefs*. 132.
<http://scholarworks.uark.edu/oepbrief/132>

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One of the key features of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 is a requirement that all teachers in core academic areas be “highly qualified” before the 2005-2006 school year. Even more quickly, by the end of the 2002-2003 school year, all newly hired teachers in Title I schools had to be highly qualified. The core academic areas—which must be taught by a “highly qualified” teacher—are English, reading or language arts, math, science, arts and foreign language, economics, geography, civics or government, and history. Teachers of special education and English language learner students are not required to be “highly qualified” unless they are teaching these core courses. The question, however, concerning many teachers, administrators, and parents is—what does “highly qualified” mean?

This brief provides a background for NCLB’s “highly qualified” teachers, defines “highly qualified,” and summarizes the actions taken by the State of Arkansas to ensure a “highly qualified” teacher will be in every classroom by the end of the 2005-2006 academic year.

WHY “HIGHLY QUALIFIED” TEACHERS ARE NEEDED

The impetus for NCLB requiring “highly qualified” teachers lies in studies conducted in classrooms in Texas, Tennessee, and numerous other locations across the country. According to the work of Sanders and Rivers (1996) at the University of Tennessee Value-Added Research Assessment Center, students with “highly qualified” teachers for three years in a row scored nearly 50 percentage points higher on math skills tests than did students whose teachers were not “highly qualified”. A “highly qualified” teacher was one who had strong verbal and math skills, was fully certified, possessed deep content knowledge, and had good teaching skills. Additionally, Sanders and Rivers found that teacher effects are both additive and

cumulative, lower-performing students are the first to benefit from higher qualified teachers, and students of different ethnicities gain equally. Finally, Sanders and Rivers did reveal a sobering finding that further highlights the importance of quality teaching: students may perform well while learning from a highly qualified teacher, but the residual effects of previous poor instruction is reflected in later achievement scores. Similar findings have been replicated elsewhere.

These data show that having these “highly qualified” teachers seemed to make a difference in student performance. Yet, according to a 1999 report by Richard Ingersoll, *The Problem of Underqualified Teachers in American Secondary Schools*, 24.3 percent of English teachers, 19.9 percent of social studies teachers, 53 percent of history teachers, 20.3 percent of science teachers, 56.5 percent of physical science teachers, and 33.1 percent of math teachers have neither a major nor minor in their teaching field. Consequently, one of the major components of NCLB is aimed at ensuring that a teacher who knows the subject matter well will teach students in all schools. NCLB, therefore, sets forth several criteria for ensuring that all students are taught by a “highly qualified” teacher.

WHAT DOES “HIGHLY QUALIFIED” MEAN?

One of the greatest areas of uncertainty regarding NCLB has centered on what “highly qualified” means for current teachers and for new teachers. According to the law, a “highly qualified” teacher will have a bachelor’s degree, have full certification as defined by the state, which can include alternative certification, and have demonstrated competency as defined by the state in each subject area taught. Thus, while most would agree that the “highly qualified” teacher provision is important,

many are concerned by the fact that federal guidelines leave a great deal of flexibility to the states. The result is that states will decide who is highly qualified, and the rules can vary from state to state. These requirements, however, apply to all teachers, which means states must decide how to apply the provision to current teachers, as well as new teachers.

Across the nation, NCLB requires new elementary teachers to demonstrate competency by passing a rigorous state test on subject knowledge and teaching skills in reading, language arts, writing, math, and any other academic area in the elementary curriculum. New middle and high school teachers must demonstrate competency by either passing a rigorous state exam in each core academic area they teach or by obtaining an academic major or coursework equivalent to an academic major, an advanced degree, or advanced certification.

Experienced elementary, middle, and high school teachers must also possess a bachelor's degree, obtain full certification, and demonstrate their competency based on the same criteria used for new teachers—that is, they must pass a test, or states may create a “high, objective, uniform state standard of evaluation” (HOUSSE) that will determine a teacher's ability to demonstrate subject area competency. The HOUSSE may be established by the state in accordance with six criteria established by NCLB. The standard of evaluation must:

1. be set by the state for grade-appropriate academic subject-matter knowledge and teaching skills;
2. be aligned with challenging state academic content standards and student achievement standards and developed in consultation with core content specialists, teachers, principals and school administrators;
3. provide objective, coherent information about the teacher's attainment of core content knowledge in the academic subjects in which a teacher teaches;
4. be applied uniformly to all teachers in the same academic subject and the same grade level throughout the state;

5. take into consideration, but not be based primarily on, the time a teacher has been teaching the academic subject; and
6. be made available to the public upon request.

An important clarification is that NCLB does not require all teachers to take a test to meet their state's highly qualified requirement. Testing is only mandatory for new elementary school teachers, but states do have the flexibility to establish criteria, which can include tests, for new middle and high school teachers, as well as for experienced teachers. Each state will individually determine what teachers must do to be highly qualified because each state determines its certification process and how teachers can demonstrate competency in their teaching field.

However, a December 2003 report by The Education Trust suggests that states may not be telling the whole truth with regard to high quality teachers. The report, entitled *Telling the Whole Truth (or Not) About Highly Qualified Teachers*, posits that some states reported accurate data, some states reported no data, and some states reported questionable data. This state-by-state comparison indicated that the variation in state definitions of highly qualified teachers might account for some of the differences in the numbers of highly qualified teachers reported; however, states may also be over-reporting their actual numbers. For example, Arkansas was highlighted as one of the suspect states because it reported having highly qualified teachers in 97 percent of its schools; however, it also reported having 97 percent of high-poverty classrooms being taught by a highly qualified teacher.

The final section examines the way Arkansas defines highly qualified and the current policies responding to the NCLB requirement.

ARKANSAS TEACHERS

The future and current teachers of Arkansas are now faced with the same scenario implemented in every district across the United States; however, the State of Arkansas is responsible for determining what highly qualified means in Arkansas. The following summary—collected from the Education

Commission of the States' 50 State HQT Definitions and HOUSSE Report—provides a straightforward answer to the question of what an experienced teacher needs to do to become or to remain a highly qualified elementary, middle, or secondary school teacher in Arkansas.

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHER— ELEMENTARY, MIDDLE, SECONDARY SCHOOL

In Arkansas, highly qualified teachers are those who hold a bachelor's degree, have full state certification, and demonstrate subject-area competency. Teachers may choose one of the following options to demonstrate subject-area competency:

1. For teachers who are fully licensed, but have not passed the state licensure assessment:
 - a. pass the licensure assessment, OR;
 - b. have a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience in the academic subject area in which the teacher teaches; OR
2. Ninety hours of Professional Development credit which must be:
 - a. recognizable for license renewal,
 - b. approved by the school district, and
 - c. in the academic subject area the teacher teaches; OR
3. An advanced Degree (Master's, or Education Specialist, or Doctorate) in the academic subject area in which the teacher teaches; OR
4. National Board Certification compatible with the teaching assignment; OR
5. Completion of a standard program of study as described in an ADE Additional Licensure Plan (which includes the state licensure assessment) in the academic

subject area in which the teacher teaches;
OR

6. For teachers whose license expired and are pursuing re-licensure:
 - a. six credit hours of coursework in the academic subject area the teacher teaches, and
 - b. passing the licensure area assessment.

CONCLUSION

Currently, 94.5 percent of teachers in Arkansas are fully certified and have earned a bachelor's degree, and, according to the "questionable" data, highly qualified teachers can be found in 97 percent of Arkansas' classrooms. However, as the deadline for having a highly qualified teacher in every classroom draws closer, state officials, administrators, and teachers in all states should recognize the key requirements set forth by NCLB. New teachers must hold a bachelor's degree, have full state certification (as determined by each state), and demonstrate subject area competency (as determined by each state) if teaching a core academic area. New elementary school teachers must pass a state-approved test, while new middle and high school teachers can demonstrate competency by successfully completing an academic major or equivalent, graduate degree, or advanced certification in each subject area the teacher teaches.

Experienced teachers, many of whom may already meet the highly qualified standard, must also meet the three requirements before the end of the 2005-2006 school year—that is, they must possess a bachelor's degree, have full state certification, and demonstrate subject area competency, which can be accomplished in numerous ways. NCLB left many of the requirements for determining a highly qualified teacher up to the state, and the State of Arkansas has developed the requirements for meeting the standard.

For more information regarding the NCLB standards visit the U.S. Department of Education, <http://www.ed.gov/index.jhtml>, the NCLB Tool-kit for Teachers <http://www.ed.gov/teachers/nclbguide/nclb-teachers-toolkit.pdf>, or to see how all states are doing, visit <http://www.ecs.org/html/IssueSection.asp?issueid=129&s=What+States+Are+Doing>. For Arkansas specific information, visit the Arkansas Department of Education at <http://arkedu.state.ar.us/> or a complete chart of requirements for all teacher certifications is available at <http://www.sreb.org/main/HQT/HQT-Arkansas.pdf>.

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