

Federal act shows difficulty of defining highly qualified teachers

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) contains many important sounding designations including the federal definition of a "highly qualified" teacher. While having highly qualified teachers in classrooms is the goal of all school districts, close examination of the federal definition reveals problems.

The salient facts of the federal definition of a "highly qualified" teacher are that teachers of core subjects (English, reading, language arts, math, science, foreign languages, social studies and the arts) must:

- 1.) Be fully licensed by the state,
- 2.) Hold at least a bachelor's degree,
- 3.) Meet state requirements to demonstrate mastery of subject area, and
- 4.) Be assigned to teach in the area of their academic certification.

Specialists may not be "highly qualified"

It is element Number 4 that could create problems, especially in small districts, in meeting the NCLB requirement that all teachers must be "highly qualified" by the 2005-2006 school year. Special education classes could be a particular problem for the following reasons:

Because special education teachers are trained to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities, they receive their certification, or endorsement, in special education, rather than in a specific subject area. Typically, a special education teacher works

with individual students in all of the subject areas affected by their disability. While they may also have an endorsement in another area...such as language arts or math...it would be nearly impossible and probably counterproductive for special education teachers to obtain endorsements for every subject area that they teach. Therefore, since these specialists are nearly always teaching "outside" of their core area, as currently defined in the federal law, they cannot be designated "highly qualified teachers," in spite of the fact that they are endorsed in, and are teaching, special education classes.

Special attention for High Poverty schools

While nearly all schools are affected under the NCLB, only those designated as "high poverty schools" must notify parents if a teacher who does not meet the federal definition of highly qualified is teaching students. The definition of high poverty schools is those with 50 percent, or more, of their students being eligible for free/reduced lunch. Applying this definition to the local area, only Banks Elementary School, Lincoln Grade School and Washington Grade School qualify as Title 1 (High Poverty) Schools.

Only 35 Oregon high schools are Title 1 schools, a

fact that highlights how some of the requirements of NCLB are less useful to parents than they might suppose. Parents of high school students in Banks and Vernonia, for instance, will not receive the same notification of teachers who have not received the highly qualified designation as will parents of the elementary schools named above.

State ranks high for percent of Highly Qualified teachers

According to a news release from the Oregon Department of Education, Oregon ranks well above the national average, with 82 percent of all classes being taught by highly qualified teachers. The national average is less than 55 percent. Self-contained classrooms (where students remain with the same teacher all day) have 94 percent highly qualified teachers, as defined by the federal standard. Though high poverty schools in Oregon have only 71 percent of classes taught by highly qualified teachers, this is still well above the national average.

State will require a plan of improvement

Susan Castillo, State Superintendent of Education, said that schools will be required to submit a plan to the state by

October 15, explaining how they will try to increase the number of highly qualified teachers. No one knows how the problem in special education will be resolved, but it appears that some change will have to be made in the law to accommodate these situations.

"The U.S. Department of Education sent its Highly Qualified Teacher Assistance Team to meet with the Oregon Department," Castillo said. "We were the first state in the nation to request a meeting, and ODE and our partners (State Board of Education, Teacher Standards and Practices Commission, Oregon Education Association, Confederation of Oregon School Administrators, Oregon School Boards Association, Oregon School Employees Association, and others) spent the entire day 'pushing back' on the definition, especially as it relates to middle school teachers."

Most local teachers meet definition of "highly qualified"

The vast majority of staff in both Banks and Vernonia meet the highly qualified requirements, except for those in special education. In Vernonia, one special education teacher and one middle school teacher do not meet the highly qualified standard. According to Superintendent Mike Funderburg let-

ters have been sent to parents of students in these classes.

According to administrative assistant Marlo Mosser, Banks has two special education teachers who do not meet the standard. Banks also has a science teacher, who will be retiring this year, who cannot meet the definition of highly qualified because the integrated science curriculum that he teaches was not an area of endorsement when he received his teaching license.

Teachers are also working to upgrade their endorsements. The Teacher Standards and Practices Commission reports that over the summer nearly 1,000 teachers requested additional certification to meet the highly qualified definition.

Snapshot approach may catch the public off guard

The highly qualified teacher designation is another "snapshot" of information available about schools, along with state reports cards and national annual yearly progress (AYP) ratings. The public would be well advised to remember that snapshots can present very different views of the same subject, and it's quite possible that none is particularly accurate. Nearly everyone has had a picture taken when their mouth was full.



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