

Uniform National Standards: No Teacher Left Behind

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ABSTRACT

This article intended to provoke dialogue among educators specifically focuses on conditions affecting teachers, and provides qualified support for a shift towards uniform national standards for teachers in public schools. It discusses the missing links and shares ideas with educators and policymakers nationwide on how a federal agenda for teachers will improve our school reform efforts to address the current shortage and quality of teachers.

I propose specific elements that currently hinder our drive to address the shortcomings that greatly impact our efforts towards putting a quality teacher in every classroom. Each of these elements if addressed, can serve as a catalyst in the production of better quality teachers, pave the way for the implementation of uniform national standards, and lead to a meaningful school reform.

School reform has been a strongly contested issue in the last fifteen years. The focus on this issue still continues, and new solutions are gaining support throughout the country. Most calls for reform have not been focused on conditions affecting teachers, even though recent research has suggested that teachers are central to reform efforts in schools (Marx, 2000). This article specifically focuses on conditions affecting teachers, and provides qualified support for a shift towards uniform national standards for teachers in public schools. It discusses the missing links and shares ideas with educators and policymakers nationwide on how a federal agenda for teachers will improve our school reform efforts to address the current shortage and quality of teachers.

Research has shown that students taught by the most qualified and effective teachers achieve at higher levels, and that the most effective way to improve our schools is to provide students with quality teachers (Fergusson, 1996). Furthermore, research using national and state data have reported significant relationships between teacher certification and student performance on achievement measures (Betts, Rueben, & Danenberg, 2000). It is the goal in

America that every child has the opportunity to learn from qualified teachers. However, for this goal to be realized, several obstacles must be overcome. One of the major impediments in this endeavor is the shortage of qualified and effective teachers especially in math, sciences, special education and hard-to-staff urban schools. According to *Education Week's* comprehensive report on the nation's teacher labor market, "Quality Counts 2000," over two million new teachers will be needed in America's schools over the course of the next decade. Among factors identified as promoting teacher shortages are new enrollments, increasing rates of retirement, large classes, low pay, lack of respect for the profession, and new teacher attrition (Johnson, 2000).

Various suggestions and solutions have been offered to address this situation, but the teacher shortages and lack of quality teachers continue to permeate our schools. In this article I propose a shift towards Uniform National Standards for teachers. The Uniform National Standards will outline what teachers need to know, understand, be able to do, and will emphasize both excellence and equity. They will also guarantee that the standards evolve to meet the needs of students, other educators, and society at large. This will create an educational system in which all teachers will demonstrate high levels of performance and will be empowered to make the decisions essential for effective learning. The Standards will apply to all teachers, regardless of age, gender, cultural or ethnic background, location or school affiliation. This will enhance the recruitment and retention of quality teachers, and ensure that every classroom in America has a qualified and effective teacher, which is a major goal of school reform.

The demand for teachers differs depending on the region; some states have an overabundance of teachers while others face perennial shortages, especially in certain subject areas, and in areas with a large percentage of low-income students (Hussar, 1999). Because of the changing demographics, many western and southern states are experiencing major teacher shortages, while other areas in the North are overproducing teachers (NCES, 2000). States have different needs and levels of complexity, and probably require different strategies to alleviate their teacher shortages. These needs strongly influence their educational policies for teacher preparation and certification, textbook structure, classroom management, salaries, teacher workload and other areas. Some states focus on the quality of teachers and continue to raise the standards and requirements, while others focus on quantity and continue to lower the requirements and standards. Individual states also require different standards for their teacher certification, and the same accrediting bodies do not accredit all teacher certification programs.

Even though there are substantial differences in the policies and practices in different states and certainly differences in how states certify their teachers, there are similarities in the core requirements for state certification. These common strands and areas for licensing across states include the completion of certain courses from state and nationally accredited teacher programs, a degree from an accredited institution, and obtaining passing scores in examinations set by the education authorities in the different states. However, even though there are these common areas, other requirements based on needs vary between states, and this inhibits our reform efforts. Teacher certification should be universal across states, rather than tailored to meet the specific needs of the states. Since the problem of teacher shortage is a national epidemic, legislators and state education authorities need to consider

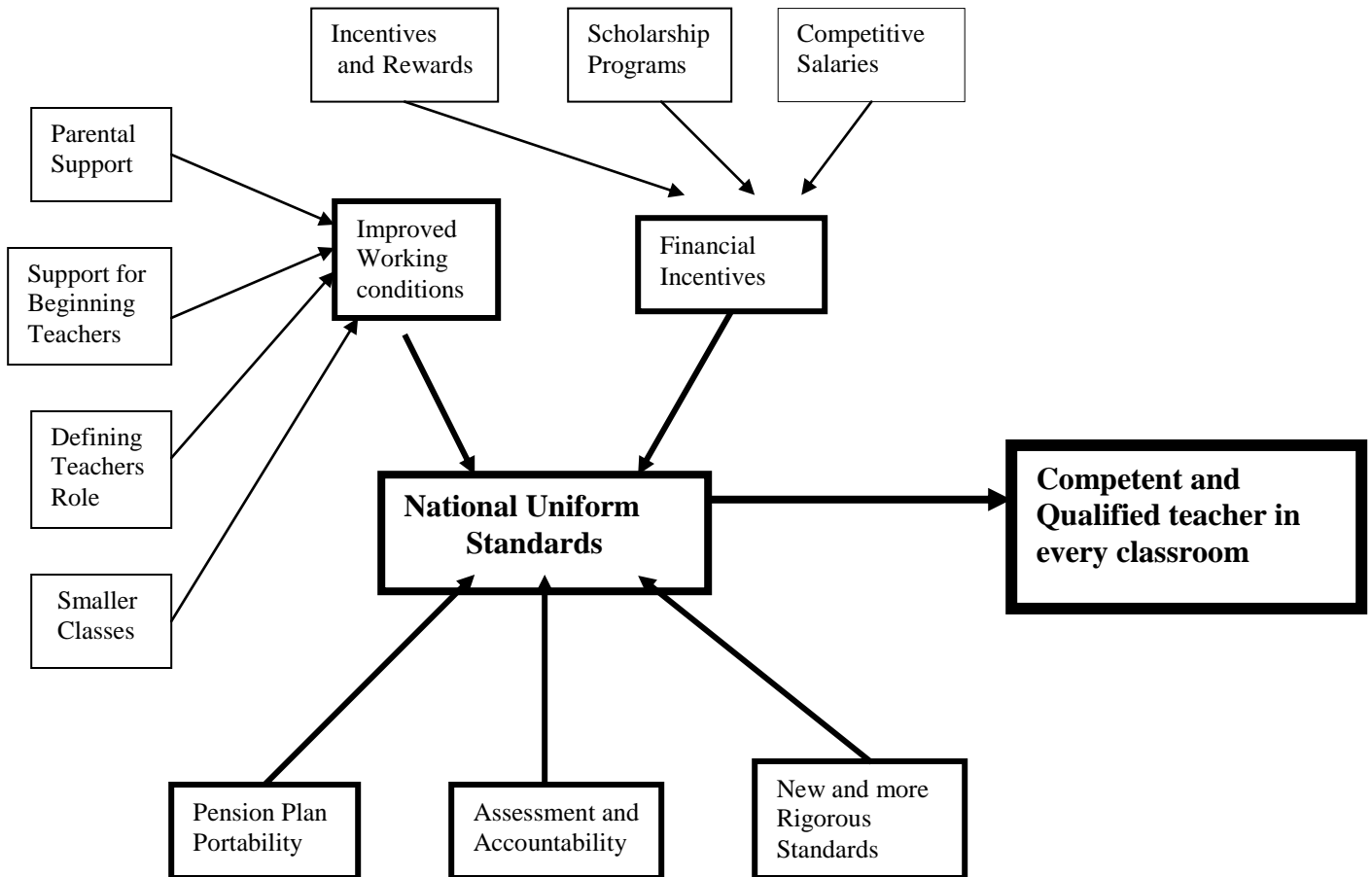
implementation of uniform national standards to resolve the problem. The result will be a larger pool of qualified teachers from which states can select. The implementation of uniform national standards across states is an important step in the strategy to address the teacher recruitment and retention dilemma currently facing many states. A valuable first step in this process might be to have a national panel of educators and policy makers evaluate the teacher certification frameworks within each state to see which practices are generalizable across states.

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) currently sets standards for Teacher Education in 43 states, in conjunction with state standards. Teacher Education programs can opt not to belong to NCATE, since only a handful of states require their teacher programs to be members of NCATE. Though several states and national teacher organizations are making progress towards adopting common standards to enable reciprocity among states, the complexity and variation in the licensure requirements have presented severe roadblocks. Transplanted teachers, for example, often face the challenge of overcoming state licensure requirements (Cromwell, 2002). More often than not, receiving states do not unconditionally accept licenses from other states. Many teachers faced with this obstacle, opt to change profession rather than go through the rigors of licensure requirements for the new state. Establishing uniform national standards will allow teachers to make lateral moves across states and thus keep them in the teaching profession. Currently the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) sets the standards and offers advanced certification in various fields ("The Impact," 2001). However, not all states fully accept the qualifications of these nationally certified teachers, and in most cases require these teachers to satisfy additional requirements to become fully licensed by the state.

The nation's Department of Education in its quest to reform schools and ensure that high quality teachers teach all students needs to take a leadership role and provide a solid foundation on which reciprocal policies can be based. By creating common knowledge and skills standards across the nation, states can align their standards to conform to the national standards, and also require teacher programs to become members of this national accreditation body. This will assure the local hiring authorities that teachers with these licenses have at least the minimum knowledge, skills and qualifications required in a quality teacher, and therefore eliminate the reluctance of states to accept licensed teachers from other states.

The implementation of uniform national standards across states is an important piece of the school reform strategy to address the teacher recruitment and retention dilemma currently facing many states. Nonetheless, efforts in this direction will prove fruitless unless other factors that influence teacher recruitment and retention are addressed. I propose specific elements that currently hinder our drive to address the shortcomings that greatly impact our efforts towards putting a quality teacher in every classroom. Each of these elements if addressed, can serve as a catalyst in the production of better quality teachers, pave the way for the implementation of uniform national standards, and lead to a meaningful school reform.

Figure I Model for Uniform National Standards



Pension Plan Portability

Among factors contributing to teacher shortages is the lack of reciprocity and portability of pensions (“Development of interstate,” n.d.). Family, or repatriation for different reasons, often necessitates teachers changing states, and many teachers are also willing to make the transition from areas with an abundance of teachers to states that have high need areas. Teachers who change jobs within the teaching profession experience varying degrees of pension portability loss. Public retirement systems in many other professions are designed to recognize and reward employees for years of continuous study. These designs make allowances for mobility in the professions, but are notably lacking in the teaching profession,

and have posed formidable barriers to teacher recruitment and retention efforts. Some states have made strides in this direction, and intra-state reciprocity is not uncommon, but the federal government needs to fashion a uniform national standard for pension portability for teachers across states. Removal of this barrier will greatly contribute to the goal of reforming our schools and having a competent teacher in every classroom.

New and more rigorous standards for teachers

Recently there has been a move to create new and more rigorous standards in education to ensure teachers have a good grasp of subject matter as well as instructional strategies (NBPTS, 2000). Increasingly the public outcry is for higher standards and greater accountability for teachers. Accrediting bodies have stepped up their standards which now require teacher education programs to show evidence that the teachers they prepare have in-depth knowledge of their content areas, can demonstrate the ability to teach, assess students, and use technology (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Critics have suggested that increasing teacher standards will create teacher shortages, but others have indicated that raising standards, if accompanied by financial incentives can help alleviate the teacher shortage problem, as well as enhance respect for the teaching profession (Sedlak & Schlossman, 1986). Improving the achievement of students is a national goal, and states have increasingly stressed the need for high educational standards, and accountability systems reflecting those standards. Since standards are not uniform across states, and improving the achievement of students is a national goal, there is a need for uniform national standards to guarantee all schools in every state in America are meeting these high goals. Uniform national standards can provide a powerful mechanism for achieving our goal of having a competent teacher in every classroom.

Assessment and Accountability

Assessment is another fiercely contested topic in education. Success or failure is reflective of the student, the teacher and the school. Teachers are increasingly being asked to teach curriculum geared towards testing, leaving them with little room for creativity. Currently many school districts use results of assessments as indicators for salary increases. On the other hand, assessment practices are neither uniform across states nor determined by the teachers and students who are the locus of the learning experience (Roschewski, Gallagher & Isernhagen, 2001). There are numerous reasons why standardized achievement tests should not be used as the only measurement of excellence in learning. Standardized tests do not necessarily match what is taught in the curriculum, items on which most students perform well are generally not included on the tests, items are sometimes culturally biased, and the

types of test items are sometimes reflective of students' experiences outside the walls of the classroom (Popham, 1999).

There is a huge outcry for school reform based on an ongoing comparison of the American system with systems in other countries around the world. Underlying this comparison is the erroneous assumption that our state education systems are uniform and can be used as a foundation for our national system. Implementation of a National Uniform Standard for classroom assessment based on established guidelines formulated by those in direct contact with students will provide a common ground for students across the nation, and thus a legitimate comparison of our students with those from other nations.

Financial Incentives

Despite the compelling nature of the teacher shortage situation, the teaching profession continues to be denied the privileges afforded other high-status professions. Even within education the financial rewards of administration are considerably higher than the financial rewards of classroom teaching. Public image is a standard by which the populace judges a profession. Making the salaries of teachers attractive and comparable to other professions will afford the teaching profession a higher status.

Even though many school districts are creating ways to increase teacher's salaries, the federal government must take the principal role and provide funding for equity within teaching, as well as funding to make teachers' salaries more competitive with that of other professions. According to reports by the American Federation of Teachers, nationally, beginning teachers earn just 72% of what college graduates make when they enter other professions, and this percentage drops comparably every succeeding year (AFT, 1999). This causes the best college graduates, including graduates in education, to seek jobs in other fields. The federal government needs to make teaching a national agenda and provide the resources to make teachers' salaries comparable to salaries of other professionals with similar education. Uniform national standards for teachers will also assure equity in salaries, regardless of the economic condition of the school district, thus enabling poorer school districts to attract and retain better quality teachers.

Offering signing bonuses, tax credits, providing housing assistance in high priced areas, loan forgiveness programs, and scholarships for training other professionals willing to make teaching a career have also proved to be effective ways of attracting teachers (Chaika, 2000). Currently the federal government provides VHA subsidized loans for veterans. A similar program for teachers will greatly increase the attraction and retention of teachers.

Improved Working Conditions

Improving the working conditions of teachers will attract the top college graduates to teaching, and also slow the exodus of current teachers. Many teachers quit because of poor working conditions and lack of respect. Among factors cited as contributing to poor working conditions are undefined roles for teachers, class sizes, and inadequate support for beginning teachers, and autonomy in decision making (Hong, 2001). Teachers have been put under pressure to raise student achievement, and at the same time are required to perform various other functions within the school system, such as keeping the peace, establishing parental contacts, and monitoring students in the hallways and bathrooms. The roles of teachers are clearly undefined and the establishment of guidelines based on national standards will provide remedies for teachers who are required to perform extremely unreasonable duties.

Class size has been shown to be related to students' achievement and is often an antecedent for more significant aspects of the educational climate. Teachers and Parents consistently rank smaller classes on their list of desired education reforms especially in predominantly minority and extremely disadvantaged schools (Waymack & Drury, 1999). Uniform national standards for maximum class sizes can provide equal access to learning for all students. Some states are using induction programs to help new teachers make a successful transition to the classroom. A federally mandated residency program similar to that in the medical profession can be established to ensure every teacher has the opportunity to learn instructional practices, management skills, and receive constructive feedback from veteran teachers.

Research shows that on the average, 30 to 50 percent of teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Star, 2000). Most of the exiting teachers surveyed or interviewed cited adverse working conditions as the primary reason for leaving (Langdon, 1996). Since working conditions are determined by school districts with little or no input from teachers, creating guidelines for working conditions based on uniform national standards will improve administrative support for teachers, increase respect from the leadership, and provide a better school climate, which in turn will increase the retention rate of teachers.

Conclusion

It is legitimate to argue that rather than change the current system, educational policy will be best served by identifying specific state educational needs and working towards fulfilling these needs. The existing structure of the educational system has shown a strong resistance to major changes. Decentralized changes in school reform efforts are not always productive, but support and legislation from the federal government frequently leads to a reform in the entire educational system (Mitchel, 1996). The absence of uniform national standards strongly contributes to the lack of success in our efforts to reform our schools and make them more effective. Across state reciprocal certification a component of uniform national standards

holds the promise for fundamental and effective school reform. The promise has not come to fruition because of the missing links in the current approach.

A growing body of systematic enquiry has addressed the specific educational outcomes associated with having a qualified teacher in a classroom. While results suggest that student academic achievement is related to teacher qualification, this outcome is not independent of the other factors presented in this model. Sufficient evidence exists from the arguments presented to validate the idea that uniform national standards will significantly contribute to the solution of the teacher shortage dilemma. This article provides reasons for implementation of uniform national standards and discusses the missing links and associated suggestions that will allow uniform national standards to have a strong, positive impact on the current shortage and quality of teachers. The contributing factors discussed are deeply intertwined and must be addressed in order to successfully implement uniform national standards.

The factors discussed here have been shown to independently and collectively affect the quality of education in America, and are directly related to uniform national standards. The suggested causal directions are not necessarily unidirectional and may well be reciprocal. For example, while support for beginning teachers may positively impact the working condition of teachers, improvement of working conditions may in turn lead to better support for beginning teachers. Clearly, there is a great deal of work to be done before the vision of uniform national standards can be realized. Salaries need to be competitive, teaching conditions improved, more support provided for beginning teachers, new and more rigorous standards implemented, assessment and accountability made more uniform, and pension plan portability enhanced. Nevertheless, if successfully implemented, each of these elements can serve as a catalyst for producing better quality teachers in greater quantities. Other factors being equal, we might anticipate that implementation of uniform national standards will greatly enhance the chances of having a qualified and competent teacher in every classroom and significantly influence patterns of school reform around the nation.

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