Quality Assurance in Teacher Education: Warranty Programs

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ABSTRACT

Teacher preparation over the past decade has increasingly become the focus of many universities due in part to numerous state reform initiatives and as the result of attention generated by several national reports and calls to action. By 2010, there will be a need for nearly 2.5 million new teachers, averaging more than 200,000 per year. Efforts to mentor and retain new teachers in the classroom take on a sense of urgency in view of the fact that over one-third of all teachers leave the profession after three years, and nearly half leave after five.

The daunting task of preparing a cadre of qualified new teachers involves a number of considerations. This article presents a discussion of two recent efforts in Louisiana and Tennessee and describes the usefulness of meaningful teacher warranty programs.

Teacher preparation has, over the past decade, increasingly become the focus of many universities due in part to numerous state reform initiatives and as the result of attention generated by several national reports and calls to action (see Cochran-Smith 2003; Gallager & Bailey, 2002; The Secretary’s Annual Report on Teacher Quality, 2002; Wilson, S.M., Floden R.E., & Ferrini-Mundy, J, 2001). These reports and numerous others ask colleges and universities to play a vital role in the preparation of teachers. By 2010, there will be a need for nearly 2.5 million new teachers, averaging
more than 200,000 per year (Scrambling for Staff: The teacher shortage in rural schools, 2000). Efforts to mentor and retain new teachers in the classroom take on a sense of urgency in view of the fact that over one-third of all teachers leave the profession after three years, and nearly half (46.2%) leave after five years (Ingersoll, 2002).

The daunting task of preparing a cadre of qualified new teachers involves a number of considerations including using standards-based instruction, mentoring, longer internships, fast-track licensure programs, P-16 Councils, and Professional Development Schools. As a means of addressing quality assurance, states have also used improved induction models, national examinations, and teacher warranties. The following discussion, based on experiences from two recent efforts in Louisiana and Tennessee, describes the usefulness of meaningful teacher warranty programs.

Teacher warranty programs in Louisiana were a part of a successful statewide reform effort including changes in licensure categories, major teacher education program reforms, more strenuous assessment and reporting guidelines, and throughout the University of Louisiana System, teacher warranty programs with the first such program initiated by Southeastern Louisiana University in 2000. Thus far, a single institution within the University of Tennessee System has initiated a teacher warranty program in January 2003. To date, this is the only public institution in Tennessee to offer a teacher warranty program.

Teacher warranty agreements, assurance programs, and teacher competency guarantees began as early as 1985 when the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia initiated a teacher warranty program. Other similar quality assurance efforts have included such programs in Arkansas, Alabama, California, Georgia, and about twenty other states (Easley, 2000).

A Context for Reform

Within most states, different policy boards, state departments of education, or task forces typically develop guidelines and other initiatives directed toward reform of teacher education. In Louisiana for example, the process, initiated in the mid-1990s, included the establishment of a Blue Ribbon Commission under the joint leadership of the overall governing body for higher education, the Louisiana Board of Regents and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which serves as the policy group for PK-16 schools in Louisiana. The Governor’s office was also involved through the joint appointment of an individual who worked directly with Louisiana teacher education programs and the Blue Ribbon Commission. This commission consisted of a cross section of individuals including teachers, parents, board members, a university dean of education, a university provost, university system president, state education and political action groups, teacher union representatives, and other stakeholders. From this group, education summits and action plans were developed, including external funding to support a major reform effort involving virtually every approved teacher education program in Louisiana.
Within the context of a top-down approach, the state took a series of major steps. These steps involved the development and external review of totally revised teacher education programs including fast-track and alternative licensure programs, a realignment of certification categories to include better coverage of specific middle-level certification, the establishment of regional P-16 Councils, and development of a statewide teacher education data monitoring system. Not unexpectedly, there was more than a 70% turnover in dean-level leadership in colleges of education over a six year period of time. The intensity of change strongly affected not only faculty, but also a significant percentage of the college-level leadership directly associated with teacher education.

The Louisiana initiative for quality assurance, which has been one of the most extensive within the last decade, was successful in part due to a combining of resources and leadership which included both Pre K-12 policy makers and university level policy makers along with community, teacher union representatives, and participants from the state legislature and public action groups. Although specific guidelines and expectations emerged over a period of five years, institutions of higher education have the flexibility to develop their own model or curriculum for teacher education. Louisiana efforts have also been successful due to an emphasis on a statewide approach to data gathering, management, and reporting. Rising levels of student achievement in schools as well as better performance of new teachers as measured by state teacher assessments and report card results for individual institutions provide evidence of improvement.

Reform efforts in Tennessee have been taking place since the early 1990s when undergraduate teacher candidates no longer majored in education. Instead, new teachers were required to complete a discipline-specific major with no more than 30 semester hours of education course work. Following this change, licensure review moved from a centralized state level to an institutional level recommending to the state department of education. More than ten years later, after two years of experience involving implementation of a national report card and beginning efforts to organize a state-wide P-16 Council structure, one public institution initiated a three-year teacher warranty program in partnership with 29 different school districts who signed an agreement with this institution.

What is a Teacher Warranty?

Basically, a teacher warranty involves a written agreement between a university teacher education program and school systems frequently served by its graduates. The warranty assures schools that these graduates can perform as quality classroom teachers. A small number of recent reports (see Bredeson, 1987; Del, 1987; Earley, 2000; Esterbrooks, Harper, & Owens (2000; Maxson & Maxson, 2002; Schalock, 1987) has included specific reference or inclusion of teacher warranties as part of an overall quality assurance program. Earley (2000) presented the most comprehensive national report involving teacher warranty programs. Her comprehensive review for the American Association for College of Teacher Education provides a national view that includes
institutional involvement by name resulting from a survey of 735 member institutions. Earley’s sample includes a 60/40 split between public and independent institutions. To date, the best estimates reflect 26 states reporting to have one or more institutions issuing some form of teacher warranty.

**Essential Components of a Warranty**

Although resulting teacher warranty programs emerge differently in different states, the resulting ingredients are similar. Whether a part of a statewide initiative such as recent efforts in Louisiana, or a more gradual evolution as in Tennessee, teacher assurance programs typically involve changes to certification processes, teacher preparation curriculums, and assessment and reporting systems. Nine different characteristics common to specific teacher warranty programs exist in Louisiana and Tennessee (see Table 1), with those characteristics similar to most programs in the remaining states issuing warranties. One of these, stated length of a warranty period, is agreed to by both the higher education institution and the school district. The remaining eight characteristics or terms of agreement are shared between the two parties.

**Table 1. Components of a Teacher Warranty Agreement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components of a Teacher Warranty Agreement</th>
<th>University / College</th>
<th>School District</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multi-year agreement (2-3 years)</td>
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<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of performance</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement in appropriate licensure area(s)</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching duties meet state guidelines</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides new teacher support</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory subject matter mastery</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention provided as needed at no cost</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful use of information technologies</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory accommodation for diverse cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic groups</td>
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Joint agreements typically include the length of time each new teacher is under warranty. From our review, institutions typically include the initial year and one to two additional years within the coverage of the warranty. Within this period, school personnel provide several assurances that directly affect the classroom performance of a new teacher. Each participating school district is expected to meet each of the following four criteria in order for the warranty to be valid. First, each school district must place the new teacher in an appropriate area consistent with his or her licensure area. Warranty programs typically do not cover teachers working in out of field assignments.

A second criterion involves assessment of performance. In most instances, school district personnel use their own or state prescribed evaluation procedures as the indicator for acceptable performance. The institution that issued a warranty may be called on for assistance if building or district-level assessment reflects a need for intervention. A third criterion involves a requirement that assigned teaching duties meet minimum state guidelines. Assignments involving excessive class size, extended duties that differ from other teachers, or other unusual workload practices could jeopardize the warranty. Finally, school districts are expected to provide each new teacher with support as required by state guidelines. Consultation, mentoring, professional development, and other mandatory support are to be provided to maintain the warranty.

Four characteristics most directly involve the higher education partner. Teacher warranties typically include assurances of satisfactory performance involving 1) subject matter knowledge, 2) use of information technology, 3) accommodation for diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, and 4) intervention on the part of the university to be provided at no cost to the student or the school district for the period of the warranty. Intervention strategies are generally developed in cooperation with school district-level personnel and may include on-site visits, additional university course work, joint reflection and planning sessions, and other activities determined on an individual basis.

We recommend that representatives from local and state teacher associations participate in the development and informing phases of implementing a teacher warranty. Warranty programs are intended to assist teachers and provide additional sources of support as they begin their careers. The goal of the process is intervention within the first year or soon thereafter to provide a new teacher with additional assistance and support to improve specific skills and competencies that will improve student learning in his or her classroom.

**Warranty Concerns**

Bredeson (1987) offered one significant voice of concern regarding teacher warranties. He provides several observations concerning the value of these programs. The author questions the likelihood that many institutions issuing warranties will work cooperatively with school districts. This is a valid concern regarding any agreement between two groups. The agreement is only as strong as the commitment of parties to
adhere to the language of the agreement. Bredeson also suggests that a potential flaw is his assertion that teachers are not “widgets.” However, this assumption is not evident in any of the available warranty documents. Local responsibility, trust among partners, and other important but subjective aspects of warranties are no different from any other guarantee for quality of services. If the parties involved are not comfortable with the concept of quality assurance linked to a written agreement, then a teacher warranty program would not be an appropriate vehicle for assuring teacher quality.

Of the 84 responding institutions to Easley’s survey (2000), most universities reported having less than 1% of school districts requesting assistance under a warranty program. Some view this as an indication that warranties are not working. Others view the lack of requests for intervention as an indication of satisfaction with graduates.

One escalating trend that may invalidate most teacher warranty programs is out of field teaching assignments. For example, Ingersoll (2003) reports that close to a third of all 7-12th grade teachers are teaching one or more classes outside their areas of expertise with teachers in high poverty schools more likely to be teaching out of their field than teachers in more affluent schools. Not only does assigning teachers out of field move beyond the scope of the university’s ability to guarantee quality, evidence suggests that such lack of preparation contributes to high teacher attrition rates and to the creation of a stable, high ability teaching force. This practice also contributes to lower levels of student learning, especially for those students who most need skillful teaching in order to succeed (Darling-Hammond, 2001).

**Warranty Support**

Most school district personnel have welcomed the concept of quality assurance in teacher education. Human resource professionals within many school districts are very positive regarding teacher warranties and see a potential for using external assistance as a part of the process for reviewing poor performing teachers. A recent survey of 34 human resource professionals representing school districts from 13 southeastern states indicated their belief (“strongly agree”) that a teacher warranty program is a useful tool (Rakes, 2004). These professionals also reported that they believe a teacher warranty program to be a helpful part of due process involving teacher performance evaluation (“strongly agree”). Respondents also provided three categories of comments relevant to this discussion.

First, if a warranty program is implemented, steps should be taken to inform fully school personnel below the level of superintendent and director of human resources. Information about a teacher warranty program and what it involves should be shared with instructional supervisors and principals to ensure complete understanding of what is expected and what is promised. Second, teachers who are covered by a warranty should be asked to sign a waiver for the release of information concerning their teaching performance before information is shared outside the school district. A final category of
comments reflected an expectation that use of a teacher warranty program might reduce the incidence of teacher grievances and lower overall attrition of new teachers.

**Quality Matters**

A teacher warranty program of any type will not by itself bring about better prepared teachers. Perhaps one of the greatest values of a teacher warranty program is the concern and attention such a program may bring to those involved in preparation programs. A warranty may be viewed as a means of reflecting confidence in program completers and as an incentive to ensure quality instructional and clinical practices.

Some believe the demand for higher levels of teacher quality by public education systems will result in shrinking pools of candidates. However, encouraging teacher quality can be a dramatic way of making the profession more desirable to highly qualified candidates and current in-service teachers (American Federation of Teachers, 2000).

Concerns about the quantity of the supply have paralyzed people from acting on quality... There's a kind of assumption that if we raise standards for who teaches, we will automatically worsen the shortage. But there is a fair amount of evidence that that's actually not the case, especially among the high-end people who will be needed to join this increasingly complex work - and who are attracted by higher standards, not repelled by [them] (Camphire, 2001).

**References**


