

The No Child Left Behind Legislation And “Highly Qualified” Teachers: An Important But Only Partial Solution For Educational Reform

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown how well trained teachers substantially impact levels of student achievement. Hiring only “highly qualified” teachers as mandated by the No Child Left Behind legislation is a step toward school reform. However, the authors contend this legislation in and of itself will not renew schools and improve student learning. Unfortunately, both new and experienced teachers in low-income schools typically receive less support and have higher attrition rates than do their counterparts in high-income schools. Although hiring “highly qualified” teachers will increase students, comprehensive school reform efforts (e.g., the work of James Comer) need consideration as well, because they have increased students’ levels of academic achievement and provided teachers with more support and opportunities to collaborate with other teachers, administrators, support staff, and parents. This additional support may help to decrease the high rates of teacher turnover of new teachers and of teachers in low-income schools.

Introduction

One of the most devastating situations for parents to face is the realization that their child has a serious illness. In such cases, parents want the best medical care for his/her child in a hospital with excellent facilities. State of the art technology enhances the effectiveness of any hospital and enables highly trained physicians, nurses, and other medical personnel to perform their duties. Likewise, the effectiveness of our school systems is dependent on well-run schools as well as on highly trained, conscientious teachers.

Recently, policy makers have recognized that a highly trained teaching profession is a key factor in the improvement and implementation of effective educational programs, and the United States Department of Education (2002) has emphasized that hiring and retaining “highly qualified teachers” as mandated by the “No Child Left Behind” legislation plays a substantial role in increasing students’ achievement levels and in enhancing the success of educational reforms. The No Child Left Behind legislation is a valuable step toward creating more equitable conditions in schools; nevertheless, more reforms affecting the entire context also need to be implemented.

Teacher Impact on Student Achievement

The premise that skilled teachers enhance student learning is supported by research. For example, Wenglinsky (2002) analyzed the data on over 7,000 eighth graders who took the 1996 NAEP mathematics assessment. Student background was measured using a questionnaire, and questions focused on such topics as a given parent’s level of education and whether there are over twenty-five books in the house. Also, the researcher examined the following teacher variables: “the teacher’s education level, whether the teacher majored or minored and major in the relevant subject area (mathematics or math education), and the teacher’s years of experience” (p. 7). Furthermore, various measures of professional development and teachers’ instructional practices were analyzed.

Wenglinsky’s findings show the impact of teacher expertise exceeds that of other variables including student income level and that qualified teachers positively influence student achievement. Another important finding is professional development in teaching higher-order thinking skills, hands-on activities, and special education, enableS teachers to prepare more effective instructional activities. Apparently, professional training has the potential to increase levels of student achievement even after teachers are certified and have teaching experience.

Like Wenglinsky (2002), Ferguson (1991) found in his study of 900 Texas school districts and 2.4 million students that teacher expertise, as measured by teachers’ scores on state licensure examinations, teaching experience, and masters degrees profoundly impacts student achievement in mathematics. Even after controlling for family income

and community characteristics, the data show teacher quality often creates significant differences in levels of academic achievement. For example, the achievement gap between low-income student and their more affluent counterparts is primarily attributed to differences in teacher qualifications. Equally important, he found that changes in students' levels of achievement between the third and seventh grade were contingent on the levels of expertise of their teachers. In this respect, "highly qualified" teachers as mandated by the No Child Left Behind legislation are a key component of educational reform.

Teacher Certification

There also is a growing body of research, which shows that teacher certification positively affects student academic performance. Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) studied the effectiveness of Teach for America teachers and other under-certified teachers on student achievement tests in five low-income school districts. Laczko-Kerr and Berliner found that certified teachers' students performed about 20% higher than did the students of under-certified teachers, and they posit that using under-certified teachers (e.g., teachers from the Teach for America program) to teach low-income primary school children is detrimental to the education of children.

These findings are not surprising because previous research has shown that well-prepared teachers who have a strong knowledge-base of their respective content areas and teaching methods are more likely to increase students' levels of academic achievement than are their lesser prepared counterparts. Monk (1992), for example, found that teachers' preparation as indicated by coursework in mathematics and sciences as well in methods to teach mathematics and science positively impacted student achievement.

Another important aspect of the certification issue concerns whether or not certified teachers are hired to teach in their certification areas. Darling-Hammond (2000) found that quality factors of teachers such as being certified and teaching in their respective degree fields were significantly and positively correlated with students' achievement in reading and mathematics. Unfortunately, the educational opportunities of many American students have been undermined because many students in the past were taught by teachers who would not be considered "highly qualified" as indicative of the No Child Left Behind legislation. As noted by the United States Department of Education (2002), it was not uncommon for under-qualified teachers to teach in American public schools.

Teacher Attrition Rates

"Highly qualified" teachers are an essential component of increasing student achievement. However, teacher attrition rates have and continue to prevent some districts

from hiring well-trained teachers. Unfortunately, 29% of beginning teachers exit teaching within the first three years and 39% within the first five years (Ingersoll, 2001). The high attrition rate of beginning teachers is especially problematic because it negatively affects student achievement levels in that teachers typically become more effective in increasing academic achievement as they gain more knowledge and expertise in planning and implementing efficacious lessons (Kain and Singleton 1996). Equally problematic, the costs of these high attrition rates are substantial. Benner (2000) found the turnover rate of teachers in Texas alone is costing between \$329 million and \$2.1 billion per year, a substantial drain on the state's budget for education.

Reasons for Teacher Attrition

One of the primary reasons teachers seek employment in other fields is low salaries (Ingersoll, 2001). Less affluent districts are typically faced with higher attrition rates because they are not able to pay teachers as well as are more affluent districts, which are more likely to attract certified teachers with higher salaries. Low-income schools especially have difficulties hiring and retaining "highly qualified" mathematics and science teachers, and lack of qualified science and mathematics teachers in low-income schools accounts to a large extent for their lower levels of achievement (Mangrubang, 2005).

Other reasons teachers leave the education profession are related to job dissatisfaction. As noted by Ingersoll (2001), some teachers have left the education profession due to lack of support from administration and because they have few opportunities for decision-making in school-related issues. Teachers who have left the teaching profession also have noted that student discipline problems and a decline in student motivation have influenced their career changes. For example, Henke et al. (1997) found in a national survey that 23% of teachers who responded to questions about school safety reported being threatened by a student. It is significant that most of the teachers who reported being threatened taught in inner city schools, which have higher attrition rates than suburban schools do. Equally important, only 12% of public school teachers believed that they had strong support from parents although only 28% of these teachers thought that the lack of parent support created substantial problems (Henke et al., 1997).

Lack of Support for Beginning Teachers

These aforementioned problems are difficult for experienced teachers but are often exasperating for beginning teachers, especially if a school does not have an effective mentoring program, which provides viable opportunities for beginning teachers

to work with their more experienced peers. Recent research has shown novice teachers often are not provided the assistance they need to become acculturated in their given school contexts.

For example, Kaufmann et al. (2002) interviewed 50 first and second year teachers in Massachusetts's schools and found most of them "received little or no guidance about what to teach and how to teach it" (p. 278). Consequently, many new teachers experienced difficulty in short and long term planning, and some new teachers reported that they "had no curriculum at all" or that established teachers at their given schools didn't seem to know much about the official written curriculum. Although new teachers welcomed suggestions from experienced teachers and believed their established colleagues had a great deal of practical advice to offer, over 50% of them stated they were not provided any guidance about specific skills or concepts to be taught.

Only "A handful of new teachers reported planning with colleagues in a manner consistent with the recommendations of the curriculum frameworks" (p. 288). The new teachers who were not afforded opportunities to plan with their experienced peers were especially worried about the demands and accountabilities of preparing their students for state tests. These teachers wanted clear curriculum guidelines and specified materials to plan effective lessons, so that their students learned to their potential.

Similarly, a study by Johnson et al. (2004) indicates there are substantial differences in the levels of practical guidance provided to new teachers in high and low-income schools. The researchers found that 91% of new teachers in high-income schools were assigned mentors in contrast to only 65% of new teachers in low-income schools. Also, 61% of new teachers in high-income schools were assigned mentors who taught at the same grade level in contrast to only 28% of their counterparts in low-income schools. Ensuring new teachers are provided instructional support is a critical factor in retaining them as teachers- especially in low-income schools, which have much higher teacher attrition rates than more affluent schools do (Ingersoll, 2001).

The more successful beginning teachers are during their first few years of teaching, the more likely they will chose teaching as their long term career. Even if beginning teachers are well-trained in their prospective content areas as well as in pedagogy, they still "need opportunities to talk with others about their teaching, to analyze students' work, to examine problems, and to consider alternate explanations and actions" so that their students are offered the best instructional practices possible and so that they have more opportunities to develop into excellent seasoned teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1030).

While retaining "highly qualified" teachers increases levels of student achievement, excessive rates of teacher attrition destabilize efforts for school improvement. As Guin (2004) notes:

Turnover makes teamwork difficult, given the instability of key players. Because the job of teaching requires a significant amount of teamwork, turnover is likely to disrupt the momentum of the entire group (p. 3).

Without the continuity of the same group of teachers working together over an extended period of time, the implementation of potentially effective programs is truncated.

Consequently, low-achieving schools, which have higher teacher attrition rates than do high-achieving schools, often are caught in a Sargasso Sea of instability and partial reform efforts, which have few positive effects on the school climate and learning environment. Under these conditions it is understandable why many well-trained teachers become discouraged and transfer to higher achieving schools (Ingersoll, 2001).

Comprehensive School Reform

As indicative of research on comprehensive school reform models, even “highly qualified” teachers need the support of the greater school context to increase student learning to its potential (Emmons, Comer, and Haynes, 1996; Borman, Hewes, Overman, and Brown, 2002). For example, James Comer’s (Emmons, Comer, and Haynes, 1996) School Development Program provides a holistic structure for school improvement and primarily is based on the working of the following school improvement teams: the School Planning and Management Team, Parent Team, and Student Support Staff Team. These three teams provide collaborative opportunities for the entire school community to create and implement plans for school improvement.

The School Planning and Management Team, which consists of the principal, teachers, support, staff, and parents, is responsible for developing a comprehensive plan to improve academics, the school’s climate, and staff development, and this team coordinates all school activities. Teachers are provided opportunities to collaborate with their peers, and in this environment new teachers have more opportunities to work with and learn from experienced teachers. Equally important, Comer’s consensus building policy gives teachers and all other parties’ knowledge of and a voice in decision-making processes.

The role of the Parent Team also is critical for school improvement in that its purposes are to build bridges of communication between the school and home and to provide opportunities for parental involvement in all aspects of school activities. The Parent Team gives parents more input into school policies and reform efforts and provides teachers with more parental support. In addition, the Student and Staff Support Team consist of professionals such as counselors, psychologists, social workers, and special educators who are knowledgeable about mental health and special education issues. The Student and Staff Support Team is an important component of school improvement, because it assists teachers, administrators and parents with students’ emotional concerns and makes recommendations for policies to improve the school climate and eliminate potential problems.

Implementing and sustaining the infrastructure of Comer’s School Development Program requires at least three to five years of sustained effort and constant collaboration among parties; there is no simple and easy fix here. However, the School Development Program is one of several comprehensive school reform plans, which have improved academic achievement of low-income and previously low-achieving schools, decreased

student discipline problems, and improved the effectiveness and morale of classroom teachers (Emmons, Comer, 2001; Borman, Hewes, Overman, and Brown, 2002).

Conclusion

“Highly qualified” teachers as mandated in the No Child Left Behind legislation significantly increase student achievement, and as noted by Lackzo-Kerr and Berliner (2002), certified teachers enhance student learning substantially more than do under-certified teachers. Attempts to lower standards for certifying teachers will not improve schools but will decrease educational opportunities for students at low-income schools, which often struggle to hire and retain well-trained teachers. The No child Left Behind legislation is important step toward educational reform; however, it in and of itself will not reform schools and lower rates of teacher attrition. Without question, our schools need “highly qualified” certified teachers, but improving the greater infrastructure of schools and creating opportunities for teachers, administrators, other school personnel, and parents to work toward achieving established educational goals is necessary as well to improve student achievement and to decrease teacher attrition rates.

The successes of various comprehensive school reform plans such as Comer’s School Development Program are encouraging because students are not just afforded the opportunities to be taught by “highly qualified” teachers but that “highly qualified” teachers- and especially new teachers- are provided more support and collaborative opportunities to enhance student learning and to build lasting careers in teaching. Just as pediatricians need excellent training as well as a competent support staff and technologically sound equipment to diagnose and treat children, our teachers also must have proper training and a support structure of the greater school context to enhance student learning.

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