

The National Challenge of Teacher Quality and Student Achievement in Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that an increasing demand for teacher accountability and student achievement is at the forefront with the mandate of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. These challenges will be crucial in urban and rural schools where the need for classroom teachers in critical teaching areas such as bilingual education, special education, mathematics, science, and foreign languages exists. Unfortunately, university teacher preparation programs are not producing sufficient critical teaching areas teacher candidates to meet the demand; meanwhile the number of alternatively certified teacher candidates appears to be increasing with the proliferation of alternative certification programs emerging to address the teacher shortages. It is important to determine whether there are significant differences in student achievement among students based on the certification route of the classroom teacher. The academic achievement of our nation's students is at stake.

The purpose of this article is to discuss teacher quality and student achievement in public schools that will ultimately benefit students. Today, more than ever before, in the history of public K-12 education, schools are expected to increase student achievement for all students, and the implementation of The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 mandate compounds to this school reform. Urban and rural schools will be severely impacted as this is where a higher rate of teacher shortages exists in addition to economically disadvantaged, primarily minority, and at-risk student populations (McDonnell, 2005). The goal of NCLB is for every child to be at grade level in mathematics, science and reading by the end of the school year 2013-2014 (Meyer, 2004). The hiring of highly qualified teachers is crucial in promoting and attaining student achievement.

The growing interest in teacher quality and accountability is not a new theme in the educational arena even though one might assume that it is based on the highly debated topic among educational policy makers and the general public today. At the forefront of these challenges are increased pressures for school accountability in the form of high-stakes testing, and teacher quality. It is only recently that the interest has focused on the certification of teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Given that urban and rural areas are turning more frequently to alternative certified teachers in high need areas, it is critical to determine whether the teacher certification route impacts student achievement.

Over the next decade, it will be essential that the nation employ 2.2 million classroom teachers (Ingersoll, 2003; Howard, 2003, Hussar, 1999; Chester & Feistritzer, 1998). This is credited to increased student enrollments, reductions in class size, and accelerating teacher retirements among an aging teacher population (Ingersoll, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1997 cited in Weiss & Weiss, 1999). More than a million veteran classroom teachers are nearing retirement in spite of rapidly increasing student enrollments (Ingersoll, 2003). Additionally, schools in high-poverty urban and rural districts are estimated to have a need of 700,000 new teachers. Ingersoll (2003) agrees that higher turnover teacher rate exists in school districts whose students are of high poverty status (p.13). NCLB provisions of teacher quality will be challenging to such school districts (Coble & Azordegan, 2004).

The data appear to indicate that there are more than enough prospective teachers produced each year in the United States overall, but there are not sufficient numbers of graduates produced in specific teaching fields (Ingersoll, 2003). Consequently, the teacher shortages will be found in the teaching fields of bilingual education, special education, mathematics, science, and foreign languages. It is argued that teacher shortages force school districts to lower their hiring standards by hiring non-certified teachers or alternative certification teacher candidates to fill teacher position vacancies. Many argue that this results in high levels of underqualified teachers and lower school performance (Ingersoll, 2003). To meet the teacher shortage demand, a wide range of initiatives have been developed and implemented to recruit new candidates into teaching in recent years. Among these are programs for degreed individuals who choose to change careers and pursue teacher education as a profession. Some of these career-changing programs are various forms of alternative certification programs (Ingersoll, 2003).

The policy implications of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) Act of 2001 have created debates affecting teacher education and certification policies as well as the hiring options available to urban school districts. In the past, as teacher demand increased, many urban school districts resorted to hiring a large number of teacher applicants on teaching permits or waivers because they lacked the formal preparation for teaching. These teachers typically taught in low-income and minority students in the most disadvantaged schools (Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Vasquez Heilig, 2005). However, under the watchful eye of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, this practice will no longer be an option for schools as there are many changes and controls related to teacher licensure in the provisions and requirements of NCLB (Anderson & Bullock, 2004).

Student achievement through means of student testing is the accountability tool that will be utilized in schools to determine student knowledge and this is not a new phenomena. The use of student test scores has been utilized occasionally since the mid-1880s as a method of allocating rewards or sanctions to schools or teachers based on the outcome of student performance on test measures (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Chester & Feistritzer, 1998). Many states and school districts have approached this similar strategy in recent times by using test scores as the foundation for promoting students from grade to grade; determining program placements (i.e., gifted and talented), and making graduation decisions (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 will require more testing and represents a substantial rise in federal regulation, particularly for states that had not chosen to test their students as frequently (McDonnell, 2005).

Urban and rural school districts face significant challenges related to the induction of teachers new to the profession (Feistritzer & Chester, 2001). According to Haberman (2003), over 40% of the 3.2 million teachers teach in six states (p. 13). The critical determinant in student achievement will be end-of-year student assessment. NCLB requires all school districts to make demonstrable annual progress in raising the percentage of students' who are proficient in reading and mathematics, and in narrowing the test-score gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Furthermore, teacher's effectiveness will be evaluated on the basis of students' scores on particular assessments (Coble & Azordegan, 2004).

In conclusion, the literature review is clear that teacher quality and student achievement are two significant challenges for urban schools, and the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 will play a profound role. Teacher shortages in specific teaching areas such as bilingual education, special education, mathematics, science, and foreign languages will continue to exist and this shortage appears to be greater in schools where high poverty exists (Ingersoll, 2003). To meet this demand, alternative certification programs have been introduced that allow individuals to enter the teaching profession in many different pathways and with many different levels of skills. Hence, the issue of alternative certification programs is one of the most debated topics about teacher education because of the increasing demand for teacher accountability. Student achievement and teacher quality are undoubtedly at the forefront with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 mandate.

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