

Today's debate: Teacher certification

# Teacher shortage worsens

## Our view:

### **New source of teachers needed, but education establishment resists.**

Sometimes the simplest solution to a problem is also the most effective. Finding enough high-quality teachers to fill classrooms is a case in point.

On the surface, the problem appears intractable. Faced with higher-paying-career choices, top college students rarely enter university-based teacher preparation programs. Yet the nation's desperate demand for teachers is about to increase sharply. A promising new education bill will soon pass Congress requiring school districts to employ only "highly qualified" teachers.

The solution lies in giving schools freedom to recruit outside the pool of education majors. School districts have found plenty of lawyers, business executives and non-education majors eager and able to teach - if only they can be certified easily.

But attempts to offer "alternative" certification are bogged down in a false debate: Education professionals say would-be teachers need to be taught the "art of teaching" in college; reformers say subject expertise is paramount and education schools are a waste of time.

In theory, the dispute could be resolved easily. Just end the monopoly granted to teachers' colleges and state bureaucrats to credential teachers. Instead, give school districts the job of teaching the "art of teaching." Free to choose teaching candidates from the widest possible pool, quality would rise sharply.

Polishing would-be teachers at the district level would produce teachers trained to teach reading, science and math in ways school districts want the subjects taught. Already, many school districts do much of that training: Poor preparation by teachers' colleges forces many districts to reteach reading instruction to fledgling teachers.

The goal would not be to run teachers' colleges out of business. Rather, it would be to winnow out the worst of these schools and remake the rest in the mold of journalism or business schools. Those programs make a student more attractive to a newspaper or business by building unique skills. But no publisher or business executive relies on those degrees. It's up to that newspaper or business to conduct the most relevant training. Teaching should be no different.

According to Frederick Hess of the University of Virginia, here's how the new system could work:

- ▶ Would-be teachers would first qualify by earning a college degree, passing a competency test of essential skills and clearing a criminal background check.

- ▶ Local schools districts would hire the brightest of the candidates as probationers who begin their training in elaborate, school-based programs supported with state and federal funds.

- ▶ When ready, new teachers would take over classrooms under the tutelage of mentor teachers. Over time, they could work up to more senior teaching positions, as happens in the business world.

Simple but effective. Except that getting there requires stepping on a lot of toes in the education establishment.

# Change standard, kids suffer

## **Opposing view:**

### **Better pay, not elimination of state rules, would help teacher shortage.**

By Arthur E. Wise

Eliminating standards and state credentialing for teachers is a prescription for disaster, especially for our major urban school districts.

Well-off suburban districts hire only fully prepared and credentialed teachers. Large urban districts must now supplement their ranks with well-intentioned but unprepared individuals who do not meet standards, most of whom are gone within two or three years. This passing parade of "teaching temps" helps to explain the dismal performance of many urban-school children.

Would USA TODAY advocate eliminating standards for doctors, nurses, lawyers, CPAs, and other professionals, just because there happens to be a shortage?

The weight of research on teacher qualifications demonstrates that fully qualified and licensed teachers raise student achievement more than do teachers who are not prepared and fully licensed.

In a 1999 report, the National Academy of Sciences concludes that teachers must be 'highly skilled' to help students succeed at higher levels on more rigorous assessments,

and that this skill development requires a comprehensive teacher preparation process. It does not happen overnight.

The public agrees. A national survey of attitudes toward teaching commissioned by Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. shows that, by a commanding majority, Americans support putting a qualified teacher in every classroom as the most effective strategy for improving schools. Eighty-eight percent want to eliminate the practice of hiring unqualified teachers. In fact, 80% of Americans call for parents to receive specific information on the qualifications of their child's teacher. Public disclosure of qualifications is included in proposed legislation in Congress now.

The Phi Delta Kappa Gallup poll this year supported these findings. Eighty-two percent of the public oppose lowering state requirements for teacher training to let in the unqualified. Raising standards, not getting rid of them, is the consensus of the public.

Higher salaries, which the American public supports based on numerous polls, would help ameliorate the shortage immediately. Another solution is to enroll unqualified individuals in professional development schools, special schools set up by districts and universities to supervise intern teachers while teaching them how to teach.

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