



VIEWPOINT

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Teacher Certification Doesn't Guarantee Competency

By: David W. Kirkpatrick

Summary

Proposals for alternative teacher certification usually arouse the ire of the teachers unions. There is a lot of talk about the need for qualified teachers, and studies say what teachers know and can do is important. But to say teacher knowledge and skills are important doesn't make the case for the present teacher certification system.

Main text word count: 680

Proposals for alternative teacher certification usually arouse the ire of the teachers unions. There is much rhetoric about the need for qualified teachers, and studies say what teachers know and can do is important, as if anyone disagrees with that. But to say teacher knowledge and skills are important doesn't make the case for the present certification system.

For decades, studies of traditional certification have found it ineffective. Even the late Al Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said it screens out many who would be superb teachers. A USA TODAY survey some years ago found almost half of the National Teachers of the Year felt their preparation was inadequate. On the same weekend delegates to a state teachers convention were rhapsodizing about "high academic and performance standards," a Pittsburgh Post-Gazette article was noting a comment by Richard Mitchell, author of *Underground Grammarian*, and a former English teacher at a New Jersey teachers college. He recalled the final exam in an education course gave 52% of the grade for being able to "Draw all the letters of the alphabet, both upper and lower case." There's a high standard.

Or consider John Corcoran. In his 1994 book, *The Teacher Who Couldn't Read*, he said he was a high school teacher for over 20 years even though he was illiterate until he was 48. The New York Post, among others, has given prime examples of writings by Brooklyn teachers. One teacher, concerned about one of her second graders, wrote, "How comes his past teachers have been passing him from grade to grade without he advancing or progressing academically. I would like to know what is causing the mental blockage." Or, how about: "Right now, teacher certification procedures are a joke! They don't distinguish between those who can and those who cannot teach." That was Arthur Wise as he became president of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Educators (NCATE). Where was he quoted? In *NEA Today*, April 1991. Delegates should read their union publications. Wise might have a different view today. It certainly would be embarrassing for him to say no progress has been made in 14 years.



Good teachers and certified teachers are not synonyms.

Source: Corbis

One national survey of 4,000 public school teachers, cited by The New York Times, found only one in five believe they are well qualified to teach in a modern classroom. If true that could be a growing problem as the National Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) contains a requirement that teachers become "highly qualified," which, one would assume, is roughly equivalent to being "well qualified."

The Washington Post cited another study which found at least one of every five public school teachers has neither a major nor a minor in the subject they are teaching, another NCLB requirement. Another Shanker comment was that at least 25% of teachers are not qualified to be in the classroom.

Connecticut, New Jersey and Texas permit alternative certification in all academic subjects and at all grade levels. About 20% of New Jersey's teachers qualify this way. Officials report teacher quality improved, the number of minority applicants doubled, and nontraditional applicants scored higher on the National Teacher Exams. In the first year, new hires included a Fulbright scholar, five Harvard graduates and a scientist with two patents to his credit. Evaluators concluded that those who moved into teaching from other careers were, in fact, better teachers and role models because they were more mature and had more varied life experiences.

Nor is New Jersey alone in its findings. Texas found no difference in quality between teachers with education degrees and those without. California concluded that "properly" certified teachers were no better than those with alternative certification, or even those with emergency certificates. It also became easier to obtain teachers to fill the sometimes critical shortage of science and math teachers.

All of which, and much more, is ignored by teacher union activists. Unthinking support of ineffective or mediocre approaches, just because they are traditional, reflects little credit to themselves and does no favor to exemplary public classroom teachers who may be identified with less than stellar colleagues.

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