

Raising standards in American schools? Problems with improving teacher quality

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Received 12 July 2006; received in revised form 9 May 2007; accepted 26 September 2007

Abstract

The quality of the teacher workforce is a subject of perennial concern in many developed countries. In the United States, through the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act, the federal government has a mandate for reform of teacher education that is unprecedented in its scale. Essentially the Act demands that every teacher of core academic subjects must be deemed to be highly qualified in every subject they teach by the end of the 2005–2006 academic year. This paper considers the impact that NCLB's teacher quality mandate is having in US schools. By drawing upon school-level data for the state of California, we examine the progress that this state is making towards meeting NCLB's mandate and also the role that teacher quality can play as a determinant of school success. The findings suggest that overall California has a well-qualified and highly experienced teacher workforce which is relatively equitably distributed among the states' institutions. On the other hand, the distribution of California's students appears to be less fair, with students from poorer homes and certain ethnic backgrounds being disproportionately represented in the state's least wealthy and least successful schools. In addition, the finding that it is student background factors rather than teacher quality characteristics that are the key determinants of school success, also brings into question the extent to which requiring teachers to improve their subject content skills will really help close the achievement gaps in California's schools.

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Keywords: Teacher quality; *No Child Left Behind*; Educational standards

1. Introduction

Over 20 years ago, the US government published a searing indictment of the state of the American public school system. The document was called *A nation at risk* and it forcefully condemned the 'rising tide of mediocrity' that was eroding the nation's schools:

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational

performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war (NCEE, 1983).

Although the ideology and evidence underpinning *A nation at risk* have proven to be controversial (Berliner & Biddle, 1995), it was to become the most important US education reform document of the twentieth century (Ravitch, 2003). Along with falling or stagnating levels of pupil performance in American public schools, it was the quality of the teaching profession that excited the most attention. The authors of the report were particularly concerned

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that teachers were being drawn disproportionately from the lowest quartile of graduating high school and college students and that in certain shortage subjects, such as mathematics, science and English, teachers were simply not qualified to teach (NCEE, 1983). Among their recommendations was a call for strengthening the teaching profession by raising its standards for training, entry and professional development, one aspect of this being the requirement that prospective teachers take fewer courses in education and more in the subjects they expect to teach. According to some commentators, in the two decades following the publication of *A nation at risk* little has changed (Koret Task Force on K-12 Education, 2003). Teachers are still being drawn from the bottom ranks of college graduates, and while teacher salaries may have risen in real terms since the early 1980s, they still lag behind that of other professions (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004; Hoxby, 2003; Manzo, 2005). Indeed the question of ‘how the nation’s teachers are recruited, prepared and trained has become the hottest topics in the public and academic discourse regarding education’ (Cochrane-Smith, 2005b, p. 3).

In 2002, the US government passed into law *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB): a piece of legislation that has provided the federal government with a mandate for education reform on an unprecedented scale. For the nation’s public school teachers, NCLB means complex systems of performance and accountability measures aimed at addressing concerns over teacher quality and increasing the number of highly qualified teachers in America’s schools. NCLB is arguably the most important piece of US educational legislation of the past 35 years. In broad terms, the Act links government funding to strict improvement and accountability policies for America’s public schools. Much of the attention already given to NCLB has focused on its mandate to raise the achievement levels of all students (for example, Abedi, 2004; Linn, 2003; Smith, 2005). However, it also legislates for reform in the way in which teachers are trained and recruited. As it applies to teacher quality, NCLB has two key objectives, the first is to ensure that every teacher is highly qualified in the subjects they teach and the second is to reduce the barriers to becoming a teacher by ‘retooling’ traditional teacher education programmes and opening up alternative routes into the profession (US Department of Education, 2004). Both have proven to be controversial.

Through an examination of the early impact of this piece of legislation and an exploration of one state’s efforts to fully comply with this new federal mandate, this paper considers how close the American public school system will come to its goal of having every child taught by a highly qualified professional by the end of the 2005–2006 school year. A key tenet behind this new piece of legislation is that teacher quality is central to school success. Using publicly available data for every school in California, this paper will test this assumption and consider the role that ‘teacher quality’, as defined under the aegis of NCLB, has on school outcomes. But first we begin by describing the key features of NCLB.

2. *No Child Left Behind* in practice

According to NCLB, every teacher of core academic subjects¹ must be highly qualified by the end of the 2005–2006 academic year. By the term ‘highly qualified’, the legislation stipulates that the teacher must have obtained ‘full state certification as a teacher or passed the State teacher licensing examination, and hold a licence to teach in such a State’ (US Department of Education, 2002, p. 4). For new teachers (those employed after the start of the 2002–2003 academic year) this means that they must possess at least a bachelor’s degree and pass state academic tests or must successfully complete, for each of their teaching areas, an academic major, or coursework equivalent or a graduate degree. Veteran teachers must meet the same criteria as newly qualified teachers or must demonstrate competence in all the subjects that they teach according to a High Objective Uniform State Standard Evaluation, or HOUSSE (US Department of Education, 2002). Each State is free to develop their own HOUSSE criteria but must address teachers’ skills in both subject-matter knowledge and teaching practice as well as provide coherent information about the teacher’s attainment of content knowledge in the subjects that they teach (Centre on Educational Policy, 2005).

In addition to improving teacher quality, NCLB mandates for improvement in the basic skills of all students. In order to determine whether a school is meeting the requirements of NCLB for student

¹Core subjects are English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history and geography.

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