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Quality must drive teaching standard

Texas' teacher certification system is shortchanging children in our public schools. It certifies too few teachers for important subject areas, such as mathematics and science, all but ensuring children will not be taught by qualified teachers.

Today, one of every five students in Texas public schools is taught by a certified teacher who has little or no formal education in the subject area. This number is expected to grow as student enrollment rises 2 percent annually and one of two teachers flee the profession after five years on the job.

The growing number of certified teachers working outside the subject they are licensed to teach bares the fundamental problem of equating a certified teacher with a qualified teacher.

Over the past decade, empirical research has been very clear about this problem. There is no consistent valid research that demonstrates fully certified teachers, produced by traditional colleges of education, are more effective than teachers who come to the classroom through other means, according to the State Board for Educator Certification.

In fact, teacher effectiveness correlates better with deep subject area knowledge and verbal skills than with teacher certification.

Today, our state requirements for teacher certification neither produce nor ensure teacher quality. On the contrary, these requirements act as a bar to some highly qualified individuals who would like to



My Turn

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teach. Although Texas has developed an alternative teaching certificate, and approximately 15 percent of teachers are now certified by completing educator programs established by institutions other than universities, this alternative offers little flexibility and innovation.

An all too common example is that of a successful businessman we recently met in Dallas. Holding a Ph.D. in geology, he had worked with political leaders from around the world. Upon retirement, he decided a way to give back to Texas was to pass on his knowledge and experience as a high school science teacher. He was told, despite his credentials, he needed to spend two years in college to learn how to be a teacher. He did that, passing the required tests with flying colors. He was then told he needed to spend a school year as a practice teacher. For this man, that proved too much and he dropped the idea. He lost nothing but some time. Students, though, lost the opportunity to learn at the feet of an amazing resource.

If the state certification system is to serve

children, certification must be redefined and the barriers torn down. Proven teaching abilities that underwrite student success must be the sole basis for certification — subject area knowledge and good verbal skills. Current requirements, except those pertaining to student safety, should be eliminated. Full discretion should be given to school districts for hiring and orienting new teachers to meet their unique classroom needs.

The State Board for Educator Certification has just taken a courageous step to refocus certification on the needs of students. On Nov. 7, the board was scheduled to vote on a rule establishing a temporary certificate for individuals who hold a baccalaureate or advanced degree and pass the state's certification exam, limited to teaching in the subject area of the individual's degree.

If the rule passes, students in Texas public schools will benefit from more teachers and more highly qualified teachers.

We must change teacher certification, employ the most highly-qualified individuals as teachers, and give our children the best opportunity for educational success.

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