

Locked out of the classroom in Texas

With the school year fast approaching, many school districts blame the "teacher shortage" for their inability to fill vacancies with certified teachers in areas such as math, science, English as a second language, and special education. But the so-called teacher shortage is a myth.

School administrators struggle to find certified teachers to teach these subjects, yet many well-qualified experts in their field are locked out of the classroom due to cumbersome certification requirements.

Texas' unwieldy teacher certification process is an unnecessary restriction that bars entry into the classroom for potential teachers. Even the alternative certification process for college graduates seeking a career change into teaching is expensive, unnecessary, and takes a year to complete.

Teacher certification emphasizes pedagogy (the art of teaching) over subject matter expertise. Certification requirements include coursework in child development, foundations of education, pedagogy, and diversity. All teaching candidates must pass a state certification exam, which tests their knowledge of pedagogy and their specific content area. Yet the exam is multiple-choice and only has an oral component for those wanting to teach a foreign language; otherwise there is no evaluation of an individual's presentation skills or teaching ability.

If student learning is the main objective, then it defies common sense to bar a genius like Albert Einstein or business guru Jack Welch from the classroom because he doesn't have a teaching certificate.

Since the demand for certified teachers outweighs the supply in certain fields, schools assign teachers to teach subjects for which they have no training. Thus, a high school unable to fill a math teacher vacancy could assign a history teacher to teach a couple of geometry classes.

When teachers teach what they themselves do not know, student learning suffers.

The Texas Education Agency reports that between 2001 and 2004, 25 percent of Texas public school teachers taught classes out of their field of study. Nationally, more than half of those teaching physical science classes (chemistry, physics, earth science, or space science) do not hold a college major or minor in any of those subjects, according to the National Governors' Association's Center for Best Practices.

When teachers teach what they themselves do not know, student learning suffers. Research finds that math and science teachers, who majored in those subjects, produce 39 percent more high performing students.

Even more troubling is that students attending school in a high-poverty area are 77 percent more likely to be assigned to an out-of-field teacher. Thus, students from disadvantaged backgrounds who arguably would benefit the most from knowledgeable teachers are the least likely to have them.

Federal policy makers tried to end this practice with the requirement in the No Child Left Behind Act that all teachers be "highly qualified" in core academic subjects by the end of the 2006-2007 school year. This requirement has reduced out-of-field teaching in Texas, as only 14 percent of Texas teachers taught out of their field of study in 2005.

Teachers are deemed "highly qualified" if they have a bachelor's degree, full state certification, and know the subject they teach. Therefore, within the "highly qualified" requirement, states have flexibility in how they define certification.

Prominent figures in the education world favor scrapping traditional teacher education policies and basing teacher licensing on a candidate's intellect and superior teaching ability -- not on courses taken.

An easy way to solve the teacher shortage problem and improve student mastery of subjects like math and science is to simplify the hiring process for teachers and allow our best and brightest to teach. Focus on results, not on inputs.

Legislators and policymakers can improve student learning and give students the best possible chance for success, by unlocking the classroom door to qualified individuals who have a desire to teach, yet don't hold a teaching certificate.

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