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State Must Drop Barriers To Teacher Certification

There's a simple formula for solving the math and science teacher shortage, the Texas Public Policy Foundation's Brooke Dollens Terry says. By adding a real alternative certification program and subtracting some needless requirements, the state can multiply its math and science teaching force.

"As Texas schools continue to face a shortage of certified math and science teachers, students continue to be taught by individuals without math or science training," Ms. Terry says. "This is called out-of-field teaching, which is defined as either lacking certification or lacking a college major or minor in the assigned teaching field."

In 2006, she reports, 14.3 percent of math teachers, 28 percent of science teachers and 52.2 percent of computer science teachers in Texas were teaching out-of-field.

Without some fundamental change, those numbers are going to continue to grow.

"The demand for math and science teachers will continue to increase as the 'four-by-four' curriculum requirements go into effect for freshmen in the 2007-08 school year," Ms. Terry says. "The 'four-by-four' requires high school students to take four math courses and four science courses in order to graduate on the recommended graduation plan - the default plan for high school graduation."

She contends that the state has put up barriers to teacher certification.

"State teacher certification requirements artificially limit the supply of qualified teachers and are a barrier to entry for many qualified individuals wanting to enter the teaching profession," she says.

It's not easy to become a teacher, she explains.

"Texas' traditional... certification process is prescriptive, time consuming, expensive and full of unnecessary requirements," she says. "Occupational licensing, like regulating teacher certification, is a way for the government to control entry into a profession and as a result, limit the career choices of our citizens. This has prevented many talented, aspiring teachers from teaching in public schools."

And the "alternative certification" programs are little better.

"Burdensome and unnecessary alternative certification requirements discourage a large number of bright industry professionals and experts from transitioning from the private sector, government or higher education into a public high school classroom," Ms. Terry says. "It is counterintuitive that an individual with a master's degree in computer science and over 28 years of work experience at IBM can teach at the college level, but is not welcome to teach at public high schools because he or she is not 'certified' by the state."

Those requirements also prevent local principals from using their own judgment about prospective teachers.

"State certification rules limit the flexibility of principals to put the most qualified math or science teacher in the classroom by preventing them from taking into account teaching ability, outstanding accomplishments, work history and education level in their hiring decisions," Ms. Terry says. "Principals need the flexibility to exercise independent judgment and hire those individuals which they believe will best serve their school and students regardless of their certification status."

The state should do two things, she said.

First, a true alternative certification process should be established. Qualified professionals with college degrees and work experience should be able to test out of content requirements and take just a few teaching courses.

And principals should be given the flexibility to waive state certification requirements without penalty, allowing them to hire the most qualified individuals.

"It is important to note that the lack of certification does not necessarily mean that a teacher is unqualified to teach a particular subject," she concludes. "Thus, lowering certification barriers does not equal a reduction in teacher quality."
