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Web Posted: 08/05/2008 12:00 CDT

Poorer schools lag as richer schools lure better teachers

Gary Scharrer- Express-News

AUSTIN — Texas is headed for big problems if state lawmakers don't fix serious inequities in teacher quality and experience between rich and poor schools, a noted education researcher warned Monday.

Wealthy, high-performing schools attract and keep experienced, higher-quality teachers while schools with large numbers of low-income and minority students are left with less-experienced teachers, according to a new study.

Schools with high populations of low-income students have twice as many teachers not properly certified to teach math and science as schools in more affluent neighborhoods, according to the report.

In high-poverty schools, nearly 20 percent of math teachers and 40 percent of science teachers were assigned to teach courses for which they were not properly certified.

Unless state legislators act, the gap is expected to grow, as incoming high school students are now required to take four years of math and science.

“We could be in a world of trouble in five years when this plays out,” said Edward Fuller, a professor in the Educational Policy and Planning program at The University of Texas at Austin.

Fuller conducted his study for the Texas Association of Professional Educators.

“Unfortunately, poor, minority and low-achieving students are far more likely to be taught by an under-qualified teacher than their more affluent, white and high-achieving peers,” said Jerry Bonham, president of the 112,000-member Association of Texas Professional Educators and a middle school English teacher in Mesquite.

Some school districts offer incentive pay in efforts to entice experienced and high-quality teachers to low-income, low-performing schools, but the typical \$1,000 to \$3,000 bonus is insufficient for teachers to deal with the extra stress and pressures, Fuller said.

It's going to take extra mentoring, more professional staff development and meaningful incentive pay to improve the teacher quality at low-income, low-performing schools, he said.

“Otherwise, we will continue to have the inequity. It's not going to go away,” Fuller said.

Lawmakers set aside extra money last year for teacher incentive pay, but many districts did not apply because matching funds were required.

If someone wrote a primer on “‘how to make your teachers quit,' they would look at what the state of Texas does,” said Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, a member of the Senate Education Committee. “We place brand new teachers in very hard-to-teach schools. We don't have strong mentoring programs, and they get very frustrated.”

It's an easier career choice for experienced teachers to stay in higher-performing schools, she said, “where they have a fighting chance that at least three-quarters of the student body will pass the test.”

About 56 percent of the 4.6 million students attending Texas public schools come from low-income families and the number of white children continues to drop — down to 35 percent last school year.

It's been difficult for lawmakers to react to the state's changing demographics, Van de Putte said: “I never win on a social justice, ‘we owe it to the kids' argument.”

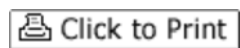
It typically takes court litigation to force legislators into action on public education issues, she acknowledged.

The inequitable distribution of experienced teachers reinforces a need to get rid of the minimum salary schedule for teachers and to adopt a differential salary policy that allows schools to pay much more if they have harder-to-teach students, said Brooke Terry, an education policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which favors limited government and free market ideas.

The group also wants to reform the teacher certification process to make it easier for a NASA scientist, for example, to teach science or physics in a public school.

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