

The Pending Teacher Shortage

The government should allow alternative routes to teacher certification.

By Sol Stern

With the possible exception of the faculties of education, no group has lobbied as fervently for more stringent teacher licensing requirements as the teachers' unions.

The reasons are clear: when government regulators pile on time-consuming and expensive requirements to obtain a licence to work, the overall effect is to reduce the job-applicant pool. Unions make claims for higher salaries when the pool is smaller, even more so when they can claim a "teacher shortage crisis."

Of course, it also behoves the teachers' unions to proclaim the need for certification and the desirability of advanced degrees. Most of the empirical research on the issue shows otherwise, however.

After studying a huge cohort of Texas schools, Rochester University economist Eric Hanushek reports "no evidence that having a master's degree improves teacher skills." Other education economists, such as Michael Podgursky and Dale Ballou, have found little correlation between completing traditional teacher-certification programs and classroom teaching skills.

The research findings shouldn't surprise most parents with children in independent schools. Among the most sophisticated education consumers in New York City are the parents who send their children to the elite private schools that charge up to \$20,000 in annual tuition. Though these schools have virtually no certified teachers, I have heard of no complaints from those parents that they are not getting their money's worth.

When the teachers' unions say that we need to raise salaries in order to guarantee a qualified teacher in every classroom, one might assume they mean someone who improves student outcomes. In fact, all the unions really mean is a teacher who has attended a faculty of education, something that bears no relation to student performance.

Public officials concerned with teacher supply problems ought to be

looking to New Jersey. For the past 15 years, that state has had one of the most successful 'alternate route' teacher-certification programs in the country.

New Jersey school districts have expanded their teacher pool by bringing in candidates — mostly recent college grads — with academic expertise and an interest in teaching who are unwilling to invest the time and money it takes to graduate from an ed school.

Hired without any credentials except their BA, they then undergo classroom mentoring with a veteran teacher. They must also take a much-condensed version of the traditional 36 credits' worth of education courses. Finally, they have to pass a state-administered subject-matter test.

After completing these three steps, and after the principal confirms that they are able to perform in the classroom, these teachers are certified.

Not unexpectedly, New Jersey's two teacher unions bitterly opposed the alternate-route program. The unions and the ed schools warned that "unprepared" alternate-route teachers would soon leave in horror when they discovered that they couldn't handle classroom problems.

But state education authorities stuck to their guns, and in recent years more than 20% of New Jersey's new teachers have come through the alternate-certification route. According to state education department figures, the alternate-route teachers have substantially higher scores on the state's subject-matter tests and lower attrition rates than traditionally-trained teachers. Moreover, a higher percentage of them are minorities.

A 'teacher shortage crisis' would look far more manageable if the school system could expand the applicant pool through alternative licensing. And there would be other advantages as well.

Alternative-route teachers have a strong grounding in their academic specialties and, not having attended education schools, they don't bring

damaging progressive-education doctrines into the classroom. Alternative licensing also allows public schools to compete for the stream of teachers that they have foolishly conceded to the private schools.

Would the alternative-route teachers be any better or any worse than traditionally-licensed teachers? Classroom teaching is the key measure: education researchers and economists now believe that teacher effectiveness in the classroom trumps every other variable — including class size, per-pupil expenditure, and ed-school courses taken by the teacher — in accounting for student improvement.

It is 10 to 20 times as significant as any other variable, according to University of Tennessee statistician William Sanders, who officially monitors student and teacher performance for the state of Tennessee.

Leo Klagholz, former New Jersey State Commissioner of Education, observes that "knowledge of subject matter, and personal traits like intelligence, human sensitivity and caring, communication ability, work ethic, self-discipline [and] ability to relate to children" are more crucial to teacher effectiveness than an ed-school degree."

"As a result," he warns, "when government uses teacher training as a formal job eligibility screen, it produces the double error of failing to guarantee the competence of those who meet requirements while also eliminating many individuals who have significant capabilities."

(Adapted with permission from "The Vanishing Teacher and Other UFT Fictions," which appeared in the Spring 2000 issue of the Manhattan Institute's City Journal (www.city-journal.org).