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Report # 65

Quality Teachers Matter

July 2004

The State Of Pennsylvania's Teachers

Quality Teaching Matters

Supply of good teachers key to improvement

As school officials across America scramble to boost the academic performance of their students to meet tougher education standards, concern is growing that they will run out of the most important ingredient of school success – quality teachers.

For Pennsylvania, the good news is the state is not burdened by the kind of severe teacher shortages that some fast-growing states, such as California, are experiencing. But some spot shortages worry education officials, as do prospects of meeting national education policy that requires all teachers be “highly qualified” by the end of the 2005-06 school year.

Why Quality Matters

The evidence that quality teaching is a critical to student academic achievement is strong. For example:

- Studies in Tennessee and Texas suggest the effect of teacher quality on student performance outweighs other school variables and can even be more influential than student and family background characteristics.
- Having high quality teachers, especially in consecutive years, can close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and other students.
- Improved teacher quality is considered the chief reason Connecticut and North Carolina have seen strong and sustained gains in reading over the past several years.

What makes a quality teacher?

Studies suggest several characteristics, including a grasp of the subjects they teach, an ability to convey subject mat-

ter to a diverse range of students, good verbal skills, and successful experience.

In Pennsylvania, school superintendents report that in hiring teachers they look for evidence of academic prowess and pedagogical skill, according to a report by The Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC) summarizing a 16-month review of the quality and availability of teachers in the state. Most superintendents also say they look for less tangible skills and attributes they feel contribute to success in the classroom, such as creativity, problem-solving, verbal skills, flexibility, teamwork, and compassion.

States address teacher quality a number of ways. For example:

- To ensure content knowledge, secondary teachers are often required to have at least the equivalent of an academic major or minor in the fields in which they will teach.

Related Reports

Today's supply of qualified teachers in Pennsylvania is adequate, but spot shortages and disturbing trends suggest problems on the horizon.

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- To ensure pedagogical knowledge and skill, teachers are usually required to complete teacher education programs and clinical experiences such as student teaching.
- States generally try to ensure good verbal skills among teachers through tests of verbal ability and through student teaching experiences.
- To promote successful experience, some states support induction/mentoring programs for new teachers and continuing professional development throughout their careers.

Pennsylvania's Certification

Pennsylvania requires teachers to obtain a state teaching certificate appropriate for the grade level and subject the applicant will be teaching. But when teacher shortages arise, requirements are relaxed to allow schools to use emergency permits to fill vacant positions.

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In Pennsylvania, a bachelor's or master's degree in an approved teacher education program and a recommendation from the program's certification officer are among the basic requirements for a Level I certificate, which is valid for six years.

New standards require aspiring teachers to complete at least three semesters of college-level liberal arts courses and earn a minimum grade point average before entering a teacher education program. The minimum GPA will rise to 3.0 by 2003-2004. Applicants for certification must also pass a series of state exams measuring math, reading, writing, and subject-area knowledge.

Mentors

Pennsylvania is one of only eight states that require, but do not fund, induction programs for first-year teachers. Districts are required to submit a plan to the state for the induction of first-year teachers and include a "mentor relationship" with either an experienced teacher or an induction team. But without state support, the intensity of these induction programs varies widely.

Professional Development

All teachers are required to complete at least 180 hours of continuing professional education every five years. And school districts must submit professional development plans that assess staff development needs and at least provide opportunities for teachers to study graduate-level courses, take in-service courses, and participate in other professional development.

In 2001, the state began its Professional Development Assistance Program, which tests all practicing academic teachers in mathematics and reading to measure their knowledge of the content of state standards at the appropriate grade level.

When a teacher shortage arises, Pennsylvania allows retired teachers to return to the classroom as long as the district first tries to hire non-retired teachers to fill openings.

Emergency Permits

School districts can sometimes use emergency permits to fill positions. These permits are issued to college graduates regardless of whether they have preparation in teaching or the specific content to be taught.

The Department of Education most often issues emergency permits when districts cannot find certified applicants to fill vacancies and when long-term substitutes are needed.

Federal Role Expanding

The federal government expanded its reach into education with new national standards under the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act. Each state, for example, is required to set academic standards and test all children in grades 3-8 each year. Within 12 years, all children must achieve proficiency on state standards.

Federal policy also requires that all teachers be "highly qualified" by 2006. They must be fully certified and cannot have had any certification requirements waived on an emergency basis. Elementary school teachers must hold at least a bachelor's degree and earn passing scores on a state test of reading, writing, math, and other basic parts of the elementary curriculum. Middle and high school teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree and pass a core content area test or an academic major or equivalent coursework.

The EPLC review found that Pennsylvania teachers meet the criteria, except those teaching on emergency certificates, those teaching in fields for which they are not certified, and seventh and eighth grade teachers who do not have a content area certificate.

While the overall supply of qualified teachers in Pennsylvania is adequate, there are shortages of teachers qualified to teach certain subjects and other trends that are worrisome.

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references

This report is based on the following publications:

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