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Subject-Matter Groups Want More From Teachers Than NCLB Seeks

By Sean Cavanagh and Kathleen Kennedy Manzo

As states strive to meet looming federal demands to find “highly qualified” teachers, some of the nation’s largest professional groups for teachers are staking out their own positions on how that term should be defined.

At least two such associations, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the National Council of Teachers of English, have crafted policies describing the knowledge and skills teachers need to capably lead classes in those subjects. Those statements offer what are in some ways more detailed guidelines than the ones set out in the No Child Left Behind Act, the nearly 4-year-old federal law that has forced states to re-examine the competence of their teacher corps.

All teachers of core subjects—English, reading or language arts, math, science, history, geography, economics, civics and government, the arts, and foreign languages—must be deemed “highly qualified” by the end of this school year.

Other professional organizations, meanwhile, have also sought to emphasize the necessary qualifications of teachers in their subjects, without outlining them in formal policies.

Such groups, which collectively represent hundreds of thousands of teachers, offer what in some cases are contrasting views of where teachers need the most help. The NCTM, for instance, places a heavy emphasis on content-matter knowledge, as demonstrated through majoring or minoring in math, or completing specific math courses.

The recently adopted policy “just gives a name to a discussion that we’ve been having for some time,” said Cathy L. Seeley, the president of the Reston, Va.-based NCTM, which has 100,000 members. “The issue just emerged as one we got a lot of questions about. ... Many people are scrambling to define what [highly qualified] means.”

The English teachers’ policy, meanwhile, places greater emphasis on the need for developing the pedagogical skill of instructors, in addition to their content knowledge. Teachers have long complained that the No Child Left Behind law pays too little attention to the cultivation of those practical classroom abilities.

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Defining High Quality

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- Completed math coursework equivalent to that required for a major, if they had to teach high school.
- Acquired math proficiency equal to a minor in college, if they teach middle school.
- Finished at least three college-level courses that emphasize math essential to younger students, if they teach in elementary school.

Curt Dudley-Marling, a Boston College education professor, who helped draft the NCTE paper as a member of its executive committee. “There is no question that teachers need to be excellent English scholars and to know their subject, but they also have to know how to teach it.”

Varied Concerns

The NCTE, based in Urbana, Ill., drafted its one-page position statement after surveying its 60,000 members to gauge their views. In addition to pedagogical skill, the statement says English teachers should have a broad knowledge of reading methods and language structures and an understanding of “new literacies,” such as technology. It also says that states should not rely solely on “high-stakes knowledge tests” to judge teachers’ competence.

The No Child Left Behind Act defines a “highly qualified” teacher as having full state certification, a bachelor’s degree, and demonstrated subject-matter knowledge. Moreover, new elementary teachers must pass a state test of their subject knowledge. New teachers must demonstrate that knowledge by passing tests in the subjects they teach, or completing college majors in them. Experienced teachers can either meet the requirements of new teachers or meet separate requirements set by individual states.

Other organizations have different concerns. The National Council for the Social Studies has not drafted its own definition of “highly qualified” teachers. But Susan Griffin, the executive director of the Silver Spring, Md.-based organization, said she worries that the law will result in schools’ dropping some of the secondary-level subjects that constitute the social studies.

The law defines history, economics, and civics and government as core subjects, but ignores the broader field of social studies. The integrated, thematic approach espoused by proponents of social studies—encompassing history, civics, sociology, psychology, economics, and geography—is criticized by some scholars, who call for a strong history-centered curriculum that presents the subject chronologically and emphasizes the central events, documents, and figures of the nation’s past.

Mr. Dudley-Marling said he is concerned that urban schools in particular will struggle with the teacher-qualification mandate. They often rely on teachers who enter the field through alternative-certification routes, which place a relatively heavy emphasis on content knowledge.

Ms. Seeley voiced similar concerns, noting that the NCTM’s position statement was aimed partly at state officials, to help ensure that the rules they set for alternative certification and other nontraditional teacher training emphasize both content knowledge and pedagogy.

The NCTM’s policy statement sets specific educational benchmarks for teachers working with students at different grade levels: High school math teachers should have completed coursework equivalent to a major in math; middle school teachers should have taken courses amounting to a minor; and elementary teachers need to have taken at least three college-level courses that emphasize essential math, such as number operations and algebra.

Currently, standards for math teachers varied partly because of different requirements set by teacher colleges and different policies in states governing certification demands and definitions of highly qualified teachers, Ms. Seeley said. Some states already had standards at least equal to the NCTM policy, she said.

Lifelong Education

René Islas, the special assistant to the secretary for teacher quality for the U.S. Department of Education, acknowledged the variation among states in the standards they set on teacher qualifications under the NCLB law, which was drafted to provide some

- Expertise in working with students from diverse backgrounds.
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flexibility. That variation is evident in the different passing scores states use in their teacher-certification tests, he noted. But ultimately, the effectiveness of those states' policies will be revealed in how much academic progress their students make under the law.

Mr. Islas said he sees mostly similarities between the NCTM's policy and the requirements of the No Child Left Behind law, though he noted that the organization's was even stronger in encouraging math teachers to seek continual professional development. "It talks about lifelong learners," he said of the math group's policy. "I'm all for it."

The 55,000-member National Science Teachers Association, has not issued a formal policy defining "highly qualified" teachers. But the organization is encouraging teachers to improve their subject-matter knowledge—a major point of concern, given that science teachers are often asked to juggle multiple assignments in biology, chemistry, and physics, said Gerald F. Wheeler, the executive director of the Arlington, Va.-based NSTA.

States have the power under the federal law to determine whether science teachers have to prove subject-matter competence in individual subjects they teach or simply a general competence in science. Regardless of which requirement states choose, Mr. Wheeler said, the law's passage has prompted the NSTA to make more professional-development resources available to teachers, particularly through the Internet. Offering those services online provides a faster, cheaper resource for science teachers than enrolling in college courses, he said.

Said Mr. Wheeler: "We're asking ourselves, 'How do we have a national impact?'"

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