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California Takes a Major Step Backward In Education Reform

The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (ESEA) in January, 2002 marked a bold redefinition of the nation's successful schools: no school is a good school unless it's a good school for all of its students. The Act requires states to separately report school and district level test scores by groups of students, and holds schools and districts accountable for getting all groups of students to proficiency on state standards in 12 years. For many states, the new reporting requirements will serve as the first ever public acknowledgement of systematic differences in the performance of local children from different groups.

Not for California, however. We're ahead of that curve – California has disaggregated school level test data for years, and our accountability system is premised in large part on closing achievement gaps between groups. But when it comes to what matters most – teacher quality – we're backpedaling, quickly.

Knowing that schools will not get all kids proficient in 12 years by doing business as usual, and in recognition of teachers' vital role, the Act demands that from now on, only "highly qualified" teachers can be hired for schools receiving federal assistance to educate poor students, and calls for a highly qualified teacher in every classroom by the 2005 – 2006 school year. As with decisions like content standards and assessments, however, the federal government left it up to each state to articulate a definition of the "highly qualified" teacher. In response, the California State Board of Education recently adopted a truly disappointing definition of "highly qualified", one that not only undermines good policies in other areas, but virtually ensures that those students in the greatest need of equitable educational opportunities will not receive them.

Simply put, we've lowered the bar so much, that what used to be our floor has now become our ceiling. California's new definition of a "highly qualified" teacher basically mirrors the current requirements for the emergency permit (a.k.a. the underqualified teacher). Worse yet, whereas the current emergency permit at least requires that the holder be enrolled in a credential program and on the way to earning a full credential, the Board's adopted definition does not. Additionally, the new definition flouts a federal directive that new secondary teachers have to have a major, or the coursework

equivalent, in the courses they teach. In other words, in response to a bold new challenge to educate all students to high standards, the State's new definition of "highly qualified" is in some ways actually lower than the current requirements for emergency permit holders.

California's full credentialing process has for years provided a roadmap for underprepared teachers to improve their skills through classroom experience, subject matter knowledge and pedagogy. The state's proposed definition of teacher quality, however, eliminates this roadmap and incentives for improvement.

The last decade of research leaves little doubt that teachers are the single most important variable in student achievement. Students who have several strong teachers in a row will soar, no matter what neighborhoods they come from. On the other hand, the results are devastating for students who are taught by two ineffective teachers in a row. The research is clear that these effects—positive or negative—are cumulative and hold up regardless of the race, class or prior achievement of students.

Despite all we know, nationally, poor children and children of color are far more likely to get more than their fair share of the least qualified teachers. In California, students in the highest poverty schools are more than 3 times more likely, and students in the highest minority schools are more than 5 times more likely to have an underqualified teacher. It is not surprising then, that California's students in low performing schools are 5 times more likely to be taught by an underqualified teacher.

Still, the most qualified, best educated and most prepared teachers continue to gravitate toward schools that are already successful, while the least prepared are assigned to the struggling schools. Why? Because a teacher's status too often flows not from how good a teacher she is, but from how elite the kids are that she teaches. Obviously, the teacher shortage clearly exacerbates this problem. And the solution is not simple, by any means. It involves a complex marriage of incentives, bold and new policy changes, and effective system-wide supports. However, one thing is certain: we cannot simply avoid the problem by disguising it. This is a problem we can't afford to define away for short-term political expediency.

California has been at the national forefront in setting high academic standards for all students. Given this, it is hard to imagine our state encouraging and adopting new rules that gravely limit the ability of tens of thousands of children to meet those standards and pass assessments. Yet, our attempt to eradicate the current shortage of credentialed teachers by lowering the bar and reducing our standards does just that. How will we meet our goal of getting all kids proficient in a dozen years if, instead of forward thinking and creative solutions, we perpetuate the same patterns of opportunity gaps?

In order to really leave no child behind, California must respond to longstanding problems in dramatically new and different ways. We must not simply define our problem away – even if the federal government allows us to do so. Congressman George Miller (D-Martinez), a key author of the Act, is right to urge the California State Board of Education to reconsider its definition. There may be components of California's current full credential requirements that are not critically important to student achievement -- and they should be swept aside. In addition, there are also rigorous alternative certification measures that California should explore. But to simply cave in to the lowest common denominator is a serious mistake.

California must revise its definition of a highly-qualified teacher to fit the spirit and intent of the No Child Left Behind Act. That should be the standard against which we measure our progress. As we raise expectations of our students, so too must we raise our expectations of those teaching them.

If we perpetuate a system that denies our neediest students access to what matters most – truly highly qualified teachers – we will continue to produce students that rank near the bottom nationally in almost every measure of performance. This fits Albert Einstein's definition of insanity: "doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result." In an attempt to find a politically acceptable 'quick fix', we foil meaningful reform.

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