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Teacher Preparation and Certification

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Nothing is more important to good education than good teachers. So it stands to reason that, if Arkansas—or any state—wants to improve its school system and provide its children with the best possible education, reform efforts that seek to improve teacher quality ought to be high on the agenda. But not all reforms are equal. And not all reforms, truth be told, are really reforms at all. Most are simply dressed up versions of the same approaches that have led to problems in the past.

States have typically tried to ensure teacher quality by requiring that teachers be certified, and by stipulating that teachers can only get and stay certified if they undergo certain types of formal preparation. For new teachers, this usually means completing an approved teacher training program, often within an education school, and taking certain standardized tests. For veteran teachers, it usually means completing a designated number of hours per year of professional development.

There is no evidence that these approaches work very well. Many education schools are known for their low quality. The cer-

tification tests required of teachers are often so easy that a tenth grader ought to be able to pass them. And the classes, workshops, lectures, and other vehicles for delivering professional development are often poorly conceived and a waste of time and money. It should come as little surprise, then, that formal certification doesn't do much to assure that teachers are competent in their subject matters or good at communicating the material to students.

Most reforms to improve teacher quality take this standard system of certification and preparation as given, and seek to improve it by tinkering about the edges. They usually aim to "strengthen" the requirements or make them "more rigorous." And when they actually do something that has the makings of a genuine departure from the standard system—by introducing alternative routes to certification, for example—the system has a way of smothering and absorbing the reforms, so that nothing really changes very much and the traditional pathways remain the dominant ones.

If Arkansas is serious about making significant progress in improving the quality of its teachers, it must be willing to move toward a new system of certification and preparation that is not just an incremental adjustment to the old. Politically this will be difficult, as there are powerful interests that have a stake in existing arrangements, and they will fight to preserve them. But this is to be expected. Most reforms worthy of the name are going to provoke resistance. It simply has to be overcome if real progress is to be made.

Recommendations

1. Commit to a new model of teacher preparation and certification. The state should embrace a new model that attempts

to promote teacher quality in a different way than it traditionally has. Its elements are:

- Anyone with a bachelor's degree who can pass rigorous tests of substantive competence and pass a background check should automatically be certified to teach in the public schools.
- Anyone thus certified can be hired to teach and can begin teaching.
- Newly hired teachers should be provided with mentors and an ongoing program of preparation. This program should be offered outside of colleges and ed schools, be easily accessible to teachers in all parts of the state, and be condensed, targeted, and modularized so that it can easily be attended in off hours and not be an onerous, time-consuming requirement.

Arkansas already has a nontraditional path to certification that embodies these simple elements. But to now this path has essentially been an add-on to the current system, and has not been regarded as a model on which to *base* the state's drive for teacher quality in the future. Today, the vast majority of Arkansas' new teachers come from the education schools through the traditional route, and only 15 percent or so come from this nontraditional route. Enrollments in the new program are growing; but the program is reaching its capacity, because it is only set up to provide preparation classes in a small number of locations and is not accessible to many of those who might want to participate.

There is a made-to-order solution here, which is to take the ball and run with it. Make this nontraditional program the new model and *invest in it*. Pour money into setting up the necessary preparation programs all over the state so that

potential teachers everywhere—people from all walks of life and of all ages who think they might want to be teachers—can have easy access to them. And launch an advertising campaign to let everyone know that Arkansas *wants* all people who think they may be interested in teaching to get involved in this program, which would literally allow them to begin teaching immediately as long as they meet the basic requirements (bachelor's degree, etc.) and can get a school district to hire them.

Were this model seriously embraced, the current system's barriers to entry—the formal hurdles, the economic costs, the time investments—that turn many people away from teaching and artificially keep the supply of teachers down would be eliminated, and the pool of teaching candidates who could quickly get certified and hired would be vastly expanded. Not all of these people would make great teachers, of course, but the districts would have many more candidates to choose from than they do now, and they would be in far better positions to find quality teachers for their classrooms.

For this logic to work, districts must have incentives to seek out and hire the very best teachers. In the past, this would have been a problem, because the districts themselves were monopolies, did not get penalized for poor performance, and could get away with hiring teachers without much regard for true quality. But this is no longer the case. With No Child Left Behind and the various state accountability mechanisms now operating, districts are under intense pressure to improve student learning and thus to find teachers who can really teach. There is every reason to believe that, were they given an expanded pool of candidates to choose from, they would use the opportunity to pick the best teachers in the pool.

2. Let the education schools adapt to the new model. Under the

standard model, the natural impulse is to think that success lies in having policymakers restructure the curricula of the education schools and otherwise plan out how these schools should do their work differently than in the past. Policymakers should forget about this. Let the leaders of the ed schools make their own decisions about how to educate new teachers, but force them to sink or swim financially based on whether anyone actually wants to participate in their programs once the districts have alternative sources of teachers.

The ed schools will not like the new model, but it will be healthy for them. Having lost their monopoly, they will know that the only way they can attract students is to demonstrate that the graduates they turn out are actually *better* teachers than students who get prepared in other ways. If they do produce better teachers, the districts will want to hire their graduates—and students will be attracted to the ed schools, and the ed schools will thrive. If they don't produce better teachers, the districts won't hire their graduates—they'll hire the competition—and fewer state resources will be invested in expensive programs that don't work. So either the ed schools will improve—which they might do in myriad ways that today's policymakers can't anticipate—or they will fail to improve, and less money will be spent on unproductive activities. Either way, Arkansas wins.

3. Design or purchase rigorous tests of teacher competency. The new model requires that teachers be able to demonstrate their substantive competence, so it is essential that the tests by which they do so are well suited to the task. Arkansas now relies on the Praxis tests, but these tests are not sufficiently rigorous. The state either needs to design its own tests, both for elementary teachers and for various fields of substantive knowledge taught in middle and high schools, or it needs to

contract with outside organizations that have already designed these kinds of tests (or are doing so). A good partner for this purpose is the American Board for the Certification of Teacher Excellence, whose mission is to ensure that teachers really do know their subjects.

4. Require that veteran teachers demonstrate their substantive competence. It is important not to put all the focus on new teachers. Most children are taught by veteran teachers who have tenure. Many of these veterans will still be in the classroom five or ten years from now—or twenty or thirty years from now, for that matter. Virtually all of these veteran teachers were certified and received their preparation under the traditional system; and some of them—probably a minority, but possibly an uncomfortably large one—are simply not very good at their jobs. This is normal for any large, complex organization, and effectiveness requires that low-performing employees be identified and either retrained or weeded out.

   At present, Arkansas tries to maintain and upgrade the competence of its veteran teachers through ongoing requirements for professional development. But these requirements are not productive. They place an onerous burden on teachers; teachers have strong incentives to seek out the easiest possible means of meeting the requirements regardless of what they might learn; and the workshops, courses, etc. that make up the professional development grab-bag are notorious for their lack of serious content. As it now exists, professional development is a waste of time and money and does not really maintain and upgrade the competence of veteran teachers. It just represents another set of hoops for teachers to jump through, so that people can feel that standards are being upheld—which they aren't.

   Arkansas needs an effective system for assuring the com-

petence of veteran teachers, and it recently passed up a golden opportunity to develop one: for No Child Left Behind requires a “highly qualified” teacher in every classroom by the 2005–6 school year, and it requires that all veteran teachers demonstrate their substantive competence in order to be deemed “highly qualified.” Unfortunately, NCLB also gives the states an escape hatch, allowing them to develop their own standards—called HOUSSE, for “high, objective, uniform state standard of evaluation”—for assessing their veteran teachers. Almost every state, including Arkansas, has purposely designed its HOUSSE standards to be so weak that essentially *all* veteran teachers will be declared “highly qualified.”

Arkansas should rethink its capitulation here and come back to seize the opportunity for reform. It should design new HOUSSE standards that require all veteran teachers to demonstrate their substantive competence in one of three ways: (a) by having a college degree in the field being taught, (b) by taking and passing rigorous standardized tests of their subject matter knowledge in that field, or (c) by demonstrating through value-added measures of student performance that the students in their classrooms are learning the material they are supposed to be learning. Teachers who cannot meet one of these requirements should not be allowed in the classroom.

Weeding out a portion of veteran teachers would create a demand for additional teachers, of course, and skeptics would counter that Arkansas already has a shortage of qualified teachers—so why make it worse? But this kind of thinking is a formula for stagnation. The new model is designed to increase the supply of teacher candidates dramatically, so the “problems” associated with weeding out low-performing teachers can readily be addressed within this integrated approach to reform. There is, at any rate, no excuse for hav-

ing incompetent teachers in the classroom. It is a travesty, in fact, that the current system has no effective means of dealing with quality problems among veteran teachers.

5. Use pay rather than just certification and training to promote teacher quality. Getting an adequate supply of quality teachers is not just a matter of certification and training. It is also a matter of pay—and more generally, of incentives. This is most obviously true when it comes to the sheer level of pay, for it is obviously true that Arkansas could attract larger numbers of high quality teachers by simply raising teacher salaries. Higher salaries would cause additional people to choose teaching over other occupations, reduce the number of teachers who choose to leave the profession, and raise Arkansas' attraction-to-loss ratio as teachers flow back and forth between it and other states. But as a strategy for increasing teacher quality, raising salaries sounds better than it really is. Significant, across-the-board pay raises are the most expensive reforms a state can pursue, and they are clearly very inefficient—meaning, they give very little bang for the buck—because they offer raises to everyone regardless of their productivity.

   If salaries are to be effective policy tools for increasing teacher quality, then the across-the-board mentality needs to be laid to rest. The same is true for the single salary schedule, a staple of the traditional system, which dictates that teacher pay be based on experience and education levels—and thus that all teachers with the same time on the job and the same educational credentials be paid the same salaries. The optimal policy is to use salaries in a *differentiated* way that recognizes their underlying effects on the allocation of teachers and their productivity on the job. The following chapter deals with pay-

for-performance, so I won't cover that form of salary differentiation here. Instead, I'll discuss two other forms that stand to be extremely beneficial.

The first allows policymakers to address supply shortages among certain types of teachers. Math, science, and foreign language teachers, for instance, are in short supply under the current system; and in order to attract more of them, Arkansas ought to be paying higher salaries to teachers in those fields. Paying them the same as all other teachers ignores the fact that these fields may be more costly to enter, in the sense that they require greater technical skill or investment or difficulty, and that the people in these fields can often demand much higher salaries in the larger marketplace—factors that create undersupply problems when salaries cannot be differentiated to reflect these market conditions. The solution is to let salaries rise, and to let them rise enough to eliminate the undersupply problems. A few thousand dollars a year might not do it. Such teachers may need to be paid ten or twenty thousand dollars a year more, depending on the field and the extent of the problem. In general, the state and its districts need to have the flexibility to make whatever differentiated adjustments are necessary to bring about the desired results.

The same logic applies for a second kind of supply problem, which is also very common. This one comes about because many teachers are reluctant to teach in schools with high percentages of disadvantaged kids. As a result, those schools and districts have much smaller pools of teachers to choose from and must usually settle for teachers who, on average, are of lower quality. The solution is to recognize the costs that teachers associate with teaching in these schools, and to compensate them for these costs through higher salaries. One way to do this is to pay teachers higher salaries

when they teach in disadvantaged school districts. (Arkansas already has such a program, but the pay takes the form of bonuses rather than salaries, and the amounts—in the $3000 range—may be too small to make a significant difference.) A more general approach, however, is to pay higher salaries to all teachers who teach in disadvantaged *schools*, regardless of the districts in which they are located. This would automatically reward virtually all teachers in disadvantaged districts (because virtually all their schools tend to be disadvantaged), and it would also reward the teachers in all other districts who choose to teach in disadvantaged schools. In this way, it addresses the problem of how quality teachers are distributed *across* districts, but also the problem of how they are distributed *within* districts—which can be equally serious.

6. Eliminate work rules that interfere with managerial flexibility in the allocation of teachers. Incentives are one way to try to match quality teachers with jobs. Managerial assignment is another. A well functioning organizational system is likely to need both if teacher quality is to be put to its most productive use.

   Many districts have formal rules or informal practices that limit managerial flexibility in the assignment of teachers. This is especially true of districts that have unions, and particularly those that engage in collective bargaining with unions. When such rules and practices are in operation, teachers may have rights (even if not formal ones) to make voluntary transfers from one school to another, or they may have rights to resist transfers to schools they find undesirable. There may also be limits on the kinds of teacher assignments that principals can make within the schools. All of these restrictions undermine the efforts of managers to see that the right person is in the

right job, and thus that teacher quality is used most productively.

The solution is for the state to prohibit school districts from adopting such rules and practices, and to prohibit collective bargaining contract provisions that contain them.