

A Good Teacher: No Substitute

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For all of the battles over the testing requirements in No Child Left Behind, there is actually broad agreement among education experts about what it takes to achieve the law's underlying goal of helping disadvantaged students catch up to their peers: good teachers.

That's not a revelation to anyone who has ever sat in a classroom — though the evidence is mounting about just how big a difference good teachers can make in the schools that need them the most. What's not obvious is how to identify the best teachers and distribute them more equally among schools.

Finding a way to match the best teachers with the neediest students is so challenging that Rep. George Miller of California, the chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, told a forum at the Brookings Institution last week that it would be “the epicenter” of the reauthorization of the education law known as No Child Left Behind.

How much of a difference can good teachers make? One widely quoted study, by researchers at the University of Tennessee, found that the average math scores of elementary school students who learned from highly rated teachers for three years were more than 50 percentage points greater than students who had low-rated teachers.

Another study released last year by Brookings found that the impact is noticeable in a single year. Students in the Los Angeles Unified School District who learned from top-rated teachers scored 10 percentage points higher on math tests than the students who were assigned to lower-rated teachers. If minority students could learn for four years from the top-rated teachers — those whose students had the best test scores in the teachers' first two years on the job — the cumulative effects “would be enough to close the black-white test score gap,” the report stated.

It's hardly a secret that low-income and minority children, even after the law took effect in 2002, are still disproportionately taught by weaker teachers. But these studies and others are illustrating a crucial distinction that is emerging in the reauthorization debate: The best teachers aren't necessarily the ones with the paper credentials.

When Congress passed the education law, it included a provision requiring states to make sure all of their teachers were “highly qualified,” meaning they must be certified by the state, have a bachelor's degree, and demonstrate that they know the subjects they teach. Now, members of Congress are having second thoughts about that provision after a flood of complaints about well-loved teachers who aren't considered “highly qualified” because they don't have the right degrees. And the Brookings report suggests that the law's focus is misplaced anyway: Teachers' credentials — whether the teachers were certified by the state, hired through an alternative certification program, or not certified at all — made virtually no difference in their students' test scores.

Amy Wilkins of the Education Trust, an advocacy group that looks for ways to close the test score gap, said Congress relied on the paper credentials as proxies for teaching quality mainly because it didn't have anything better to work with. "We now need to focus on effectiveness," she said because the current focus on credentials "doesn't account for the fantastic new teacher, nor does it account for the burned-out veteran."

Unequal Distribution

Research is scarce on what techniques work best to distribute the best teachers more equally among the schools. But there are common threads in the school district initiatives lawmakers are looking at and the ideas they're getting from education experts.

One idea is simple enough: Pay the good teachers more to teach in high-poverty schools, especially math and science teachers whose skills are especially needed. In Guilford County, N.C., the district has started offering an extra \$2,500 to math teachers who agree to work in hard-to-staff elementary schools and \$10,000 to algebra teachers who sign up with middle and high schools in low-income areas. One result: The district had 164 applicants to teach math in those schools this year, compared with 18 in the previous year, according to superintendent Terry Grier.

There are other incentives Congress is looking at, such as better professional development and opportunities to advance to become mentors and master teachers. In one high-poverty school in Texas, the Thurgood Marshall Elementary School in Richardson, the neediest students made significant gains in writing and math after it began such a program, principal Wanda J. Watkins testified at a March hearing.

Perhaps the trickiest issue, though, is what to do about teachers who don't measure up — not because they don't have credentials, but because they don't teach well. A nonpartisan commission that studied the No Child Left Behind law called for the creation of a new category of "highly qualified and effective" teachers, which would go to the top 75 percent of teachers based on test scores and other measures. The bottom 25 percent, after several years, could be fired. Teachers' unions have blasted the proposal, saying it's not fair because some teachers will always be in the bottom 25 percent — a definition just as blunt as the "adequate yearly progress" test measures for schools under the current law.

Even if Congress shies away from the proposal, though, it is likely to consider an alternative strategy: finding ways to give school principals more latitude to hire the teachers they want in the first place. "I don't think collective-bargaining agreements should allow teachers to automatically go to a school because of seniority," Miller said at the Brookings forum. "I think principals have got to be able to select their teams. And they should be responsible for them, should be held accountable for them." That may be enough of a battle in itself to keep Congress busy for months.