

Round Table Discussion: Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Criteria for Special Education Teachers

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Testimony

Senator Alexander and members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss with you the highly qualified standards for special education teachers. This topic is important to me not just in my role as Tennessee Commissioner of Education, but as a former special educator and especially as the mother of a son who has multiple disabilities. It is imperative that our children with disabilities be taught by the most qualified teachers with one goal in mind: improved student performance, at whatever level that might be for each individual child.

First, let me commend the U.S. Department of Education and Secretary Spellings for giving states the flexibility to establish a Highly Objective Uniform State Standards of Evaluation (HOUSSE) for special education teachers who teach multiple subjects or students who take alternative assessments.

Currently in Tennessee, almost 600 of approximately 6,000 special education teachers are teaching on permits or waivers. This may appear to be a shortage of licensed special education teachers, but in fact, it is not.

There are enough licensed special education teachers to fill these classroom positions, but many of these professionals have chosen not to teach special education. They tell us they leave largely because of burdensome paperwork, and unfortunately, the highly qualified requirements have the potential to serve as a disincentive for our most effective teachers to remain in our special education classrooms.

In order to help special education teachers comply with the highly qualified teacher requirement by the '05-'06 school year, we have taken advantage of the flexibility offered. Special education teachers can achieve "highly qualified" status in the same manner as a general education teacher. In addition to an academic major, a degree in the core subject area, or National Board Certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, Tennessee teachers can become highly qualified through one of four (4) options:

1. Testing

The State has required NTE/Praxis Exams for licensure since 1984 and content specialty exams since 1987. The number of required tests has steadily increased over the years, and all new graduates will enter the profession highly qualified in at least one core academic subject area by virtue of their licensure exams.

2. Professional Matrix

This enables teachers to accumulate “points” for a variety of professional competencies related to the content area and teaching skills. The 100- point Professional Matrix emphasizes content area and includes categories such as: teaching experience; positive evaluations, including Career Ladder; college coursework; honors, awards, and publications; professional leadership; and professional development.

3. Teacher Effect

This is a statistical means of estimating the teacher’s impact on student achievement or learning, produced as a component of the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS). The analysis of teacher effect data is based upon a three year average of improvement in student achievement for all students in a specific content area.

4. Teacher Framework for Evaluation and Professional Growth

This instrument is based upon the essential ingredients of quality teaching: content knowledge, pedagogy, and the ability to measure learning. It is built around six different evaluation domains and indicators and is supported by a rubric that defines the levels of the teaching, with a strong emphasis on content knowledge.

While this flexibility is helpful, teachers teaching multiple subjects are required to demonstrate highly qualified status in each of the subjects taught. Thus, some feel that the requirements for special education teachers are more rigorous. To obtain a Tennessee special education license, teachers must complete 24-43 semester hours in special education in addition to the general education degree requirements. We believe the process should allow special education teachers to demonstrate competencies commensurate with the needs of students in their classrooms.

For example, teachers of students with severe cognitive disabilities should be considered highly qualified by meeting our state's requirements for a special education license. By completing additional special education coursework and successfully passing the teacher's licensing exam, they demonstrate the subject area knowledge sufficient to effectively provide the level of instruction appropriate to students like my son.

It is our understanding that the HOUSSE option will sunset in 2006. We recommend that this option remain in place for special education teachers and for general education teachers who are reassigned to a different academic subject. In addition, we recommend an extension of the current two-year window in which special education teachers of two or more academic subjects may become highly qualified through the HOUSSE option.

Students with disabilities deserve effective teachers, and special educators must understand not only the subject, but the student. I have spent most of my professional career and my personal life dealing with issues that affect the lives of children with disabilities. At the end of the day it’s about more than the standards. It’s about making sure that we do all we can to place and retain effective teachers in our special education classrooms so that all students, including those with disabilities, reach their potential.