

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

Bill Number:

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Witness:

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Testimony

The NCLB/IDEA Highly Qualified Teacher Criteria:

A Rewarding Challenge

The NCLB/IDEA Highly Qualified Special Education Teacher (HQT) criteria offer teachers a “rewarding challenge”.

The NCLB/IDEA standards indisputably have positive intents. Students with disabilities are expected to meet the same academic standards as all other students. Teachers who deliver instruction to students with disabilities are required to meet the same standards for content knowledge as general education teachers. Who can argue with such noble intents?

Nevertheless, these requirements are not without their share of challenges. In our school system, tremendous apprehension and dismay surrounded the announcement that teachers teaching multiple core academic subjects would be required to meet the NCLB/IDEA HQT definition. Many of our high school teachers were reeling from what seemed to them to be an overwhelming requirement. As the school system leader, I have shared in their concerns.

However, as a school system, we have chosen to focus on the positive, even rewarding side, of these challenges.

First of all, our difficult task in meeting these requirements are less burdensome thanks to the outstanding assistance we received from the Alabama State Department of Education. The Department has taken a proactive approach in assisting our school system, as well as all Alabama school systems, in meeting these challenges.

Dr. Mabrey Whetstone, State Director of Special Education Services, recently dropped everything to arrange an impromptu meeting to address the concerns of many of our administrators regarding the HQT Special Education requirements. Moreover, the Alabama State Department of Education keeps a steady and user-friendly flow of information, as well as hands on technical assistance, coming into our school system to help us navigate these requirements.

Another reward that has surfaced as a result of the IDEA HQT challenges is that our personnel have had to rethink and reengineer the way we deliver special education services in our school system. Even though inclusion has been a vital part of our program for the past several years, the HQT requirements have caused us to strengthen our delivery process. In meeting these requirements, our administrators have become more engaged in the process of special education services.

Non-traditional settings including team teaching, collaborative teaching, and consultative teaching, while challenging to implement, have bolstered our special education services.

These are creating a synergy between our regular education and special educators. Natural support networks are being fostered between children and the staff. We are seeing that all students benefit from the strength of two teachers who represent different educational standards. Students with disabilities taught in regular classes are demonstrating heightened self-esteem and achievement is demonstrating measurable growth.

Other rewards due to these criteria included the following: Our teachers are becoming more involved with research-based methodologies that benefit all students. As a school system, we have had to revisit our outmoded, outdated scheduling strategies to the benefit of all students. The Elmore County school system is providing reimbursement to teachers, including special education, who take coursework or tests to meet HQT status. However, it is important to realize that even though we are choosing to focus on the rewards, in the day-to-day operations of our schools, these requirements are first and foremost, enormously challenging.

As always funding is an issue, particularly funding as it relates to staffing to monitor this process. The old adage states, "You don't respect what you don't inspect". Indeed, we need additional personnel to coordinate and monitor these activities as well as to help with scheduling and teacher assistance and consultation. Yet another challenge is that these requirements are going to cause some of our schools, particularly at the junior and senior high levels, to exceed class size caps and cause an overload in some of our classrooms at the jr. high/senior high level. We are also challenged by the fact that we are seeing our pool of special education teacher candidates diminish every year.

Nevertheless, the bottom line is that the positive rewards outnumber the challenges we are facing. Already we are seeing incremental increases in student achievement directly related to the IDEA HQT criteria. Though the journey ahead will not be easy, our school system will continue to search for avenues and opportunities to provide excellence in education for each and every student.