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Summary

The shortage of public school teaching candidates in Oregon is exacerbated by the state's certification requirements. In fact, certification does not guarantee qualification, but can deter some of the best and brightest from entering the classroom.

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Certification doesn't equal teacher quality

By Matthew J. Brouillette and Aaron W. Davis

Oregon, like most states, is having difficulty recruiting qualified teachers for its public school classrooms. As policymakers consider solutions to the teacher shortage problem, they should focus their energies on eliminating the single greatest barrier that prevents some of the best and brightest people from choosing the teaching profession: government certification.

“What? How can *removing* certification requirements *improve* the teaching profession?” some will rightly ask. The answer is: certification does not guarantee qualification. In fact, it is increasingly clear that, rather than ensuring quality, teacher certification serves to deter some of the most qualified individuals from entering our classrooms and further exacerbates the shortage problem.

Sam Peavey, professor emeritus of the School of Education at the University of Illinois, is among many experts who argue that, “After 50 years of research, we have found no significant correlation between the requirements for teacher certification and the quality of student achievement.”

In Oregon, all traditional public school teachers must have state certification, and half of all teachers at charter schools must have such government approval. Yet instead of working to remove this barrier, some policymakers—with the full support of the Oregon Education Association—want to subject all charter school teachers to state requirements. The legislature would be wise to consider the mounting evidence that certification does not necessarily equal qualification.

Arizona has no certification requirement for its charter school teachers. Not one of Tempe Preparatory Academy's 14 full-time faculty is state-certified, yet each member holds a bachelor's degree and the 10th grade math teacher has a Ph.D., as do two Humane Letters teachers. None of this Arizona charter school's instructors would be allowed to teach in Oregon's traditional government schools. However, the academy's students score higher than all public schools in the state except one, a magnet school that is allowed to screen enrollment.

Statistics on homeschooled children also demonstrate the weak relationship between certification and academic success. Students who are educated by parents with teaching certificates score in the 88th percentile on a basic battery of tests, while children with non-certified parents score in the 85th percentile—hardly a large enough difference to convincingly prove the superiority of certification. Students taught at home by mothers who *never finished high school* score a full 55 percentile points higher than public school students from families with comparable educational backgrounds.

Across the nation, private schools that don't require certification attract as high or an even higher caliber of teacher talent than public schools, although they often pay much less. According to John Merrifield, senior research associate at the Education Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., "Fewer private schoolteachers have teaching certificates, but more have a degree in the subject they teach and more come from selective, prestigious universities, factors that correlate much more highly with student achievement than certification."

The Oregon Education Association (OEA) and other teacher's unions lobby to preserve the certification status quo, claiming it protects the children's best interests. But if Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan could convince a school board that he could teach children, why should the unions object to him teaching an economics class?

Union leaders want to maintain gatekeeper status to the teaching profession and protect the monopoly on teachers and public education. But if we want the highest quality in the teaching profession—a goal the OEA supports—the legislature needs to ease teacher certification requirements and provide alternative methods for qualified teachers to enter the classroom. Doing so might encourage college professors and other highly educated professionals across Oregon to consider entering the public school classrooms.

Ultimately, the power to ensure quality in teaching should lie within local communities and schools, where on-the-job teacher training similar to an apprenticeship would help more than any certification requirement. Principals should be permitted more authority to determine what qualifies a person to teach and, with the assistance of superintendents and school boards, set standards for teachers according to their respective communities and schools.

Second only to parental involvement, teacher quality dramatically affects student academic success. By allowing alternative hiring criteria, Oregon could actually increase the quality and expertise of teachers in the profession while helping solve the current shortage problem.

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