

Glossary of Key Teaching Quality Terms

These definitions of frequently used educational terms and phrases can help parents and the public better understand what terms referring to teaching quality mean.

Alternative certification. Professionals from fields outside education often become teachers through alternate certification routes. Many states now offer certification for those who already hold bachelor's degrees and who may have experience outside the field of education to become qualified to become classroom teachers. Some of these programs are offered at colleges and universities; others are run by school districts or independent providers. The traditional route by which one became a teacher was to complete a teacher education program as part of a baccalaureate degree program at a college or university that had been approved by the state licensing authority.

Assessments. Assessments, or tests, are important tools for measuring academic progress and identifying students who need extra help. There are numerous kinds of assessments available to help educators measure a wide array of skills and knowledge. Understanding what different types of tests measure and how to use the results is imperative in helping all students achieve their full potential.

Curriculum. Curriculum includes the coursework and content a teacher covers with his or her students, including textbooks, workbooks, resource materials and class projects. There is a trend (particularly in the elementary grades) toward using a common curriculum for each subject area in each grade level. Like assessments, curriculum is available in varying degrees of quality and can serve many different goals.

Emergency or temporary certification. To fill teaching vacancies, particularly in areas suffering severe teacher shortages, states and school districts extend emergency or temporary certificates to allow teachers who are not fully credentialed to begin teaching.

Highly-qualified teachers. Under the new federal law all newly-hired teachers must hold a bachelor's degree, be fully certified, and demonstrate subject matter competence by completing a major or passing a test. Veteran teachers must also demonstrate subject competence, but states can develop additional high, objective, uniform state standards of evaluation, otherwise known as HOUSE.

Induction. Induction programs are designed to support new teachers as they enter the classroom for the first time. Induction programs often match new teachers in the school with more experienced teachers who can mentor them and share best practices. Induction programs often offer additional supports, such as opportunities to collaborate with other new teachers and additional professional development. Such support is critical, because research shows that 30 percent of new teachers quit in their first three years on the job. More than half quit after five years on the job.

Mentoring. To help new teachers and provide them with support in developing lesson plans, preparing for tests, managing classroom behavior, working with parents and other critical areas, school districts often use initiatives that match more experienced, "master" teachers with teachers who need extra support. These mentoring programs yield benefits for the new teachers and the veterans.

Merit pay. Merit pay, pay-for-performance and other forms of differentiated pay scales adjust teacher salaries to reward higher levels of student achievement. It comes in many different forms, including merit-based salary schedules, bonuses, incentive pay, and differential staffing or "master teacher" plans. Merit pay can be linked to a district's regular single-salary schedule (teachers with high ratings advance up the scale more quickly), or it can be administered as a separate "merit-pay schedule" (supplementing the regular salary). Participation by teachers can be either mandatory or voluntary.

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Becoming nationally board certified is a rigorous process of reflection and evaluation of classroom practices and teaching ability (www.nbpts.org). The process involves an extensive series of performance-based assessments that examine teaching portfolios, student work samples and videotaping of classroom interaction. Teachers also complete a series of written exercises that probe the depth of their subject-matter knowledge, as well as their understanding of how to teach those subjects to their students. Several states offer bonuses and other incentives for teachers to become nationally board certified.

Paraprofessional. There are a broad range of support staff in schools called “paraprofessionals,” who play critical roles in educating children, but do not have teaching degrees. These include classroom aids, custodians, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, nurses and administrative staff. Under the new federal law all paraprofessionals who work directly with students in academic content areas must have two years of postsecondary education or demonstrate the necessary skills on a formal state or local academic assessment. Under the previous 1994 law, all paraprofessionals were required to have a high school diploma or GED.

Pedagogy. Often referred to as the “art” of teaching, pedagogy includes the strategies and instructional practices teachers use to engage students, deliver content knowledge and organize their classrooms. Pedagogy does not include subject-matter expertise; it encompasses the instructional practices used to convey subject matter to students.

Pre-service teaching. Sometimes referred to as student teaching or internships, pre-service teaching provides prospective teachers with classroom practice under the supervision of college faculty.

Retention. Efforts to keep educators from leaving the teaching force are called “retention” strategies. According to the National Council on Teaching and America’s Future, 30 percent of new teachers quit within the first two years of teaching. More than half quit after five years.

Scientifically based research. Research that involves the application of rigorous, systemic and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to educational activities and programs (U.S. Department of Education). This term is used more than 100 times in the new federal law, directing states and school districts to use curriculum, professional development and reform strategies that are “scientifically based” and proven. To help capture this research and make it accessible to schools the U.S. Department of Education has set up a “What Works” clearinghouse.

Single-salary schedule. A single-salary schedule provides salary increments according to a teacher’s years of experience and number of college/university units and degrees. This teacher salary schedule was first implemented in several big-city districts in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The basis for paying teachers different amounts, i.e., years of experience, education units and different jobs, are objective, measurable and not subject to administrative discretion.

Standards. Standards define what students should know and be able to do and provide a benchmark for measuring whether a student has mastered a defined set of skills and knowledge. Tests aligned to state standards provide teachers and parents with a valuable measure for identifying student strengths and weaknesses and classroom practices that may need adjustment. All but one state (Iowa) have developed state standards.

Teacher certification tests. States frequently use teacher certification tests for certifying and licensing teachers to work in the classroom. Forty states use the ETS Praxis series of tests for beginning teachers to certify teachers. There are three tests: Praxis I for students entering a teacher training program; Praxis II for teachers seeking licensure; and Praxis III, a classroom performance assessment for first-year teachers.



Teaching “out-of-field.” Teachers are said to be “teaching out-of-field” when they are assigned to teach subjects in which they are not qualified. States define this differently according to their certification requirements, and most consider a teacher to be out-of-field when teaching a subject for which he or she is not certified. Schools and districts often assign teachers to classes for which they are not certified when a teacher with the proper credentials is not available or when they need to cover one class and not a full day. Sometimes when an appropriate teacher is not available, administrators employ long-term substitutes rather than enlarge or cancel classes. Nationwide, students in one of five classes in U.S. secondary schools have teachers with neither a major nor a minor in the subject. In schools whose students come from low-income households, the percentage of teachers teaching out of their field is much higher. Under the new federal education law, all new hires in Title I middle and high schools are required to have a major or the equivalent in every subject in which they provide instruction. By 2005-06, that requirement will apply to all secondary teachers in every school.

Tenure. Tenure is a form of job security for teachers who have successfully completed a probationary period. Its primary purpose is to protect competent teachers from arbitrary nonrenewal of contract for reasons unrelated to the educational process — personal beliefs, personality conflicts with administrators or school board members, and the like. The type and amount of protection vary from state to state and — depending on agreements with teachers’ unions — may even vary from school district to school district. In general, a tenured teacher is entitled to due process when he or she is threatened with dismissal or nonrenewal of contract for cause: that is, for failure to maintain some clearly defined standard that serves an educational purpose.

Title I. The No Child Left Behind Act consists of ten “titles,” which address various facets of K-12 public education, such as bilingual education, school safety, professional development, etc. Title I, Part A, usually referred to as Title I, targets federal funding to schools with low-income students. About 58 percent of America’s schools are “Title I” schools. (www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SASA/cepprogressp.html)

Title II. The No Child Left Behind Act consists of ten “titles,” which address various facets of K-12 public education, such as bilingual education, school safety, professional development, etc. Title II outlines how federal funding targeted to preparing prospective teachers and sharpening the skills of current teachers and school administrators should be spent. (www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/AIDP/epdp.html)

Teaching quality web resources

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices — www.nga.org

*NGA's Center for Best Practices offers a clearinghouse of promising state practices to improve teaching quality. Some recent reports and research includes:

Issue Brief on Mentoring and Supporting New Teachers:

www.nga.org/center/divisions/1,1188,C_ISSUE_BRIEF^D_3011,00.html

Rewarding Teacher Quality: An Investment in the Future:

www.nga.org/center/divisions/1,1188,C_ISSUE_BRIEF^D_2701,00.html

Issue Brief on Exploring Teacher Peer Review:

www.nga.org/center/divisions/1,1188,C_ISSUE_BRIEF^D_538,00.html

Issue Briefs on Teacher Mobility:

www.nga.org/center/divisions/1,1188,C_ISSUE_BRIEF^D_1524,00.html

Education Week's Quality Counts 2003 — www.edweek.org/sreports/qc03.

*This report provides state-by-state assessments of teaching quality, using a range of indicators.

Public Education Network's Teaching Quality Community Action Guide — www.publiceducation.org/tq/

*A national association of local community-based groups working to advance school reform in low-income communities across the country.

Education Commission of the States — www.ecs.org

*This fall will provide an interactive 50-state database of teacher preparation policies
www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueID=129

Education Trust — www.edtrust.org

*Highly respected standards-based reform advocacy organization, which recently issued reports on the rigor (or lack) of state teacher licensing exams and the importance of providing all children with high-quality teachers

National Staff Development Council — www.nsd.org

*A national non-profit association of about 8,000 educators who believe that high-quality professional development is essential to helping all children learn to high levels.

National Council on Teacher Quality — www.nctq.org

*A nonprofit organization devoted to the pursuit of teacher quality by "bringing common sense to bear on this urgent national priority."

National Commission on Teaching and America's Future — www.nctaf.org

*Advocacy organization

