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July 2003

Media analysis

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## **News Coverage of Teacher Quality Issues**

With the new No Child Left Behind Act teacher requirements taking effect, news coverage of teaching quality has spiked nearly 400 percent over last year at this time. Most of this coverage was generated by:

- States and school districts sending letters home to parents informing them about their right to know the qualifications of their child's teacher; and,
- The release of a U.S. Department of Education report to Congress, which reported that more than half of the nation's teachers did not meet the federal requirement.

### **Lack of context and attention to solutions**

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NCLB's "highly qualified" teacher requirements are generating some of the same 'all or nothing' pronouncements sparked by the "needs improvement" list announcements. Media have generally not defined the term "highly qualified" well or presented the term in context. Headlines accompanying a national AP story on the U.S. Department of Education report to Congress on teacher quality warned: "Half of teachers are not qualified under the new law," leaving the impression that most teachers are not college graduates or fully licensed – as opposed to teaching out of field.

Coverage is just beginning to make distinctions between the federal law and state definitions:

"A study by the State Board for Educator Certification found that more than 50,000 Texas teachers were teaching subjects they were not certified in for more than half the day in the 2001-02 school year. That represented about 18 percent of all teachers. The study said 56,551 were teaching at least one subject they were not specifically trained in. In some cases, that might have meant a biology teacher teaching physics, but in other situations there were teachers with no training in science teaching." (*Dallas Morning News*, July 25, 2003)

To date, almost none of the stories focused on efforts to assign more teachers to teach the subject areas of their college degree or to obtain more coursework in their subject areas. With the exception of the North Carolina *Charlotte Observer* story excerpted below, most media reports about the new highly qualified teacher requirements did not reference solutions. About half the stories implied that "many good veteran teachers will no longer be able to teach."

“A new federal education law requires teachers to be ‘highly qualified’ or report their deficiency to the parents of their students. Recently, about 40 Gaston, Lincoln and Kings Mountain teachers ensured that they won’t have to do that – at least for the next 10 years. Under the federal No Child Left Behind law, the 40 teachers are considered ‘highly qualified’ now because each completed a one year national certification program that includes a three-hour exam and a written and video portfolio documenting their teaching methods.” (*Charlotte Observer*, April 30, 2003)

### **Personal becomes political**

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Quotes in news coverage of struggles to meeting the new federal requirement reflect the emotional and personal nature of the public’s reaction. Coverage to date includes many quotes from insulted teachers and cynical administrators:

"It's wrong to tell people they have several years to meet a requirement but in the meantime we're going to tell everybody that you're not a good teacher," said board member Betty Peters of Dothan. "If the federal government thinks that's right, well, they're wrong and if they want to threaten to withhold some money, let them." (*Alabama Associated Press*, June 25, 2003)

“As the No Child Left Behind Act is implemented, many excellent teachers will no longer be able to teach. Many are certified to teach all subjects in the seventh and eighth grades. Their teaching certificates will no longer be valid after 2006... I have bachelor's and master's degrees in industrial education as well as 30 semester hours of math, 20 semester hours of computers, and many hours of professional development. I have been teaching middle school students for 31 years and math for 25 of those years. Under the new guidelines, I am not considered a ‘highly qualified teacher.’” (*Grand Rapids Press*, June 9, 2003)

“ ‘Montana thinks I’m a qualified teacher, but the federal government doesn’t agree,’ declared a 25-year-old social studies teacher from Winnett, where the ‘townspeople say he does a darn good job.’ ” (*New York Times*, June 23, 2003)

### **Higher standards framed as escalating recruitment and retention challenges**

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Nearly all coverage mentioned the negative effect the new requirements would have on efforts to attract and retain good teachers. This is particularly the case in rural states and states with teaching shortages, where teachers often are assigned to teach multiple classes, some of which are not in the subject area of their major.

“Critics of the federal requirements say they pose problems in districts that already have trouble attracting teachers, especially for specialized areas such as physics or special education, and have to rely on people instructing outside their subject area.” (*Michigan Associated Press*, May 1, 2003)

“My blood pressure rises every time someone mentions teacher shortages. Why? Despite a bachelor's degree and a high grade point average from a liberal arts college, years teaching in adult education programs, work experience in my teaching field, and hundreds of dollars

spent in applications to alternative certification programs, I do not fit the definition of highly qualified teacher as laid out in the No Child Left Behind Act.” (Houston Chronicle, July 26, 2003)

### **Death of references to research about importance of teaching quality**

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To date, only one story in *USA Today* has mentioned what research shows about the effect of a teacher’s experience and qualifications on student achievement:

“[Research] suggests that teachers should have both a grasp of the subject and an understanding of pedagogy — how to teach. But that finding conflicts with Bush administration proposals, which have supported programs that downplay pedagogy and recruit teachers with strong subject-matter backgrounds.” (*USA Today*, July 16, 2003)

The *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* and *Chicago Sun-Times* each did in-depth series on teacher quality, referencing local data and national research. Although they provide examples of constructive, thorough journalism, the stories were essentially unrelated to the NCLB provisions. ([www.post-gazette.com/localnews/20030202overviewregxp1.asp](http://www.post-gazette.com/localnews/20030202overviewregxp1.asp) and [www.suntimes.com/special\\_sections/failing\\_teacher/index.html#part1](http://www.suntimes.com/special_sections/failing_teacher/index.html#part1))

### **NEA lawsuit**

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News coverage of the National Education Association’s announcement to sue the federal government over unfunded mandates in the No Child Left Behind Act was fairly significant. As such, they’ve earned the “opposing view” position in most coverage, including coverage of NCLB teacher quality provisions:

“The National Education Association (NEA), which represents 2.7 million educators, has criticized the focus of No Child Left Behind. Although the law stipulates that highly qualified teachers must be in all classrooms, it doesn’t address how to get those teachers there, NEA spokeswoman Denise Cardinal said. ‘Competitive wages, good benefits, a nice working environment – the law doesn’t address those things at all,’ Cardinal said. ‘If we’re serious about getting highly qualified teachers in the classroom, we need to make it an attractive profession.’” (*Stateline.org*, July 11, 2003)

### **Next generation of stories**

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Stories about teacher quality will likely move to a closer examination of the elements of good teaching and whether and how these needs are addressed in teacher preparation and professional development. Following is a list of likely topics and issues addressed in future media coverage of teacher quality.

- State communicators may want to invite reporters to cover summer professional development institutes for teachers and principals. States that have a proactive plan of action for strengthening the teacher pipeline will have a better opportunity to tell their stories.

- Editorial pages and columnists will begin to look at qualifications beyond certification that make a difference in good teaching, such as enthusiasm, experience, compassion and a sense of humor.
- Reporters will likely play up local angles related to the percentage of teachers with emergency or temporary certification in local schools, a potential problem illuminated in the U.S. Department of Education report to Congress. Local angles will also focus on parent concern, confusion and anger about receiving letters from the district, alerting them that their child is being taught by a teacher who is not “highly qualified.”
- Coverage is also expected to look at correlations between teacher qualifications and the schools listed on the “needs improvement” lists. ACORN and the Education Trust are pushing states and the U.S. Department of Education to address the equity issue – the extent to which the poorest schools tend to have the least qualified teachers.
- Reporters are also likely to cover state efforts to help teachers meet the new requirements. Some coverage may focus on the lack of capacity in the states to track the necessary data required to comply with NCLB, as noted in a recent General Accounting Office report. In addition, as states begin to promote alternate ways of demonstrating competency and gaining state certification to meet the new requirements that may involve innovative partnerships with local colleges, these also will gain attention.