THIRD WAY

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Increasing Access to Truly Highly Qualified Teachers

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As Congress considers reauthorizing the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), better known as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), countless stakeholders have been loudly advocating to make sure their perspectives and priorities are included in the legislation's latest rewrite. But the disappearance of one of the bill's past provisions from new drafts, including the Senate's bipartisan compromise bill—the *Every Child Achieves Act of 2015*—has received little more than a shoulder shrug from advocates and policy wonks alike: the requirement that every classroom must be led by a "Highly Qualified Teacher" (HQT).[1] The relative silence around that provision's removal does not indicate that teacher quality is not an important factor in improving K-12 education in this country. Rather, it reveals that the HQT provision may have outlived its usefulness and would now do little to meaningfully improve the quality of the teaching force.

In this memo we offer a new approach that would 1) incentivize, but not force, states to improve teacher quality, 2) encourage more rigorous entry requirements for teachers, and 3) remove one of the biggest barriers keeping high-achieving young people from entering the teaching profession. The idea is simple: as part of a new ESEA, we suggest creating a framework for a "common application" for teachers—one we're calling the Interstate Teaching Application (ITA)—which would simultaneously encourage states to honor reciprocity agreements with their neighbors and maintain a high bar for the teachers entering their classrooms.[2] This high bar for new teacher licensure would allow teachers in these states to teach in other states with similar requirements without having to pay expensive fees or take additional time-consuming tests.

Looking Back: A Brief History of HQT

NCLB mandated that all teachers of core subjects must be "highly qualified" by the end of the 2005-2006 school year, with the goal of addressing the teacher equity problem, wherein the least qualified teachers were disproportionately instructing the most disadvantaged students. For teachers already in the classroom, this meant being fully certified by their state, however their state chose to define certification, and not holding their credentials on an emergency or temporary basis. In addition to these requirements, a new teacher was required to hold a bachelor's degree and demonstrate subject-matter competency through rigorous subject knowledge and teaching skills exams given by the state. [3] In these ways, the HQT requirement took unprecedented steps to ensure that all teachers entering the profession were college educated and had the basic skills enabling them to deliver academic content—requirements that most people agree were necessary and would be difficult to undo now that they are in place. Unfortunately, allowing states to develop their own standards for teacher certification and dictate the passing scores on their teacher exams undermined the intent of the HQT provision and did little to encourage states to truly rethink what they should require of their teachers before they step foot into the classroom. [4] Controversy surrounding the provision accelerated in 2007, when a group of parents and education activists in California sued the Department of Education over a set of regulations that included teachers-in-training in the definition of "highly qualified teachers." [5] In response to that lawsuit, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals issued a decision striking down those regulations. Congress then issued a clarification that defined "highly qualified" loosely—saying that teachers who had not yet obtained full state certification should still be considered "highly qualified teachers" under federal law as long as they were working *toward* certification. [6] Because of this relaxing of the reins on teacher quality, the HQT provision became increasingly moot.

In the absence of a meaningful consensus around teacher quality, states have continued to set their own bar for entering teacher qualifications. But instead of voluntarily raising their standards, most states have maintained low passing scores for their teacher exams—the average cut score for state licensure exams is the 16th percentile—and few require any sort of performance assessment that requires teachers to demonstrate their ability to teach. So instead of recruiting high-performing individuals into the classrooms that need highly effective teachers the most, the lax definition of "highly qualified" has resulted in the exacerbation of the inequitable distribution of teachers. Due to this limitation, and the fact that the changes that have already been made —like requiring all teachers to have a bachelor's degree—would be difficult to undo, it is possible that HQT has outlived its usefulness.

Looking Forward: The "Interstate Teaching Application"

Though the HQT provision in *No Child Left Behind* fell short, the intentions were correct. That is why the next ESEA bill should include a way to incentivize states to improve the quality of their teachers on their own—because, currently, there isn't a persuasive reason for states to do so. We believe the incentive is reciprocity.

True reciprocity for teacher licenses—an agreement between states to recognize the credentials of teachers from other states—simply does not exist in most places, even though the development of "reciprocity agreements" is listed in the text of NCLB as a permissible way to apply Title II funds. [7] In fact, NCLB's accountability requirements may have contributed to the fact that licensed teachers face so many barriers when they cross state lines. Before NCLB, several states and regions maintained reciprocity agreements that allowed teachers to transfer their credentials across state lines without facing a litany of barriers. But by mandating that 100% of students achieve proficiency in math and reading by the year 2014, NCLB had the unintended effect of

encouraging states to close their doors to teachers who may have received their credentials from a state with more lenient or different certification and licensure requirements. So today, teachers who move to a state where they were not initially licensed must pay hundreds of dollars in fees and satisfy additional requirements in order to teach, no matter how many years they've spent in the classroom or the rigor of their completed credentialing program. And because of these barriers, some states actually find it easier to recruit internationally than from their neighboring states. [8] The outcome is an unconscionable waste of human capital—great teachers remain confined within their states, unable to move without having to complete a separate set of licensure requirements, and states recruit teachers from across the globe rather than from across the closest state line.

We believe allowing states to opt into a common application for teachers may offer an answer. The concept of a common application shouldn't be a foreign one—today, over one million prospective undergraduates use a common application to apply to the more than 500 public and private colleges and universities that accept it. [9] There is no reason this same idea can't be applied to the teacher workforce. A common application for teachers—what we're calling the Interstate Teaching Application (ITA)—would allow licensed or provisionally licensed teachers who have taught for at least one year and have passed rigorous content, pedagogy, and performance exams to upload their resumes and teaching portfolios to a database, which state education departments, school districts, and school leaders could access when they have job openings. And if these local entities wanted to have access to this database, they would have to require higher standards for their entering teachers. This would give all states and localities the reassurance that the teachers they are considering for recruitment are actually highly qualified to teach. And it would incentivize states to make their own licensure process more rigorous in order to have access to this new, high-achieving teacher pool.

A pilot program aimed at the development of the ITA could easily be added to Title II of NCLB. In fact, Title II of the *Every Child Achieves Act* (ECAA), the bill that passed out of the Senate HELP Committee with a unanimous bipartisan vote, authorizes states to use their funding to reform teacher certification systems and develop mechanisms for effectively recruiting and retaining teachers—goals that would undoubtedly be served by piloting the ITA. Among other things, a reauthorized ESEA should make it clear that, just as colleges and universities do not have to partake in the common application process, nor do states have to participate in the Interstate Teaching Application. But if they wish to have access to teachers' applications from across the U.S., they must maintain or implement a high bar for entry into the teaching profession in their state. And for those states that do, the federal government would help them set up and staff a new database of teachers that could be *truly* called "highly qualified."

Conclusion

The slow unraveling and resulting irrelevance of the HQT provision reveals that simply making unrealistic demands or toothless assertions won't fix our teacher equity problem, but pouring money into a system with no accountability won't work either. The middle road is providing the infrastructure for innovative ideas like the ITA and letting states decide whether they want to take the steps to participate. The hard truth is that without innovations like the ITA, we cannot expect these local decision makers to singlehandedly and voluntarily revamp the quality of their teachers without an incentive to do so—they must have a set of tools that will enable them to build and strengthen their workforce. Including a pilot program to develop the ITA in a reauthorized ESEA would not only accomplish that but it would also ensure that the person standing in front of each and every classroom is highly skilled and prepared. And that's the very best thing we can do to ensure that all children are receiving a quality education.

END NOTES

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