

Breaking the Cycle of Teacher Inequality: New Standards for Teachers in a P-20 Education System in Illinois

As Advanced by the Faculty Advisory Council to the Illinois Board of Higher Education
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Illinois legislators and university faculty, media, parents and other taxpayers continue to debate the merits and inadequacies of the No Child Left Behind Act, but the media, along with both private and publicly funded studies on the state of education in Illinois have recently, and we think correctly, centered the debate on teacher quality—what it means to be a “high qualified” teacher and how the most successful teaching candidates are concentrated most often in only the wealthiest districts in the state.¹ In our view, the first step toward improving teacher quality and eliminating inequities in teacher distribution in Illinois is to understand what should be called the P-20 Cycle—and how all levels of education are inter-related. If poorly prepared teachers are certified and employed in Illinois primary and secondary schools, the students they teach will likewise be poorly prepared for college. Of that group, those who do attend college will be that much less prepared for the rigorous training necessary to become teachers—and yet a percentage of them will choose teaching as a profession. As the cycle continues, poor teacher quality creates not only less and less qualified teachers over successive generations but a less and less educated and less skilled work force in the state.

Currently, many excellent programs exist in Illinois to support struggling teachers. Millions of dollars of private, state and federal grant money are being spent to develop best-practices and mentoring programs that might be replicated across the state to improve teacher quality. Alternative certification programs such as Golden Apple are finding ways to bring the best and the brightest from all the professions into the teaching field with the targeted support they need. Much can and must be done to support those teachers already in the workforce, or those who enter it with a solid undergraduate degree plus demonstrated appropriate work experience (starting with the more adequate, targeted, and equitable funding of education in the state as a whole), but given present fiscal constraints, such funding and the much-needed expansion of such programs is not in the offing. Nor does the support of *current teachers* necessarily improve the longer term cycle. Both the recent *Education Schools Project* report (September 2006) and the *Education Trust* report (June 2006) identify key problems but offer impracticable solutions.²

In our view, the way to begin to *break the cycle of poor quality teaching and teacher inequality* immediately is to intervene at the university level—in programs of teacher preparation and the liberal studies that support them. Raising the preparation and certification standards associated with those teacher attributes the research shows will correlate with improved student performance—content knowledge, learning theory, and instructional prowess—provides a long-term solution to the challenge of preparing Illinois teachers as a *uniformly* “high-quality” workforce.

To this end, the Faculty Advisory Council to the IBHE recommends the following new standards for future teachers be put into effect as soon as practicable, and that the Governor and the Legislature bring together a Task Force representing *all stakeholders* in teacher preparation to specify steps for their implementation.

1. **Required Majors:** Following the lead of many other states, certification for elementary teachers in Illinois (Type 03) and for secondary teachers (Type 09) should require

completion of a Liberal Arts and Sciences major (or the strict equivalent of such a major offered in another College or discipline) in addition to any education degree requirements.³ Secondary-level teachers must be required to complete the major for which they are hired to teach (e.g., English, History, Mathematics, Foreign Languages).⁴ Exceptions to this requirement should be strictly discouraged.

2. **Enriched Majors:** Elementary- and Secondary-level education majors should pursue what the *Education Project* report refers to an “enriched major,” designed through collaboration of Liberal Arts and Education College faculty in conjunction with practicing teachers.⁵ Whether by adding requirements or specifying requirements in place of electives, the goal of major “enrichment” is for programs to lead students to focus on those specific courses offered in the major that will best prepare them for teaching careers in a given area. In addition, programs should provide specific advisors for teacher-prep candidates in both their liberal arts and sciences major and in the Education program in which they are enrolled.
3. **High Quality Teacher Candidates should be able to show a High-Quality GPA:** The cumulative grade-point average certification majors earn for all Education courses must be 3.0 or higher. The cumulative GPA for these students’ liberal arts and sciences major must also be 3.0 or higher.⁶
4. **Maintaining Quality Standards at Higher Levels:** MAT/graduate-level initial certification program entrance requirements should match or exceed the undergraduate requirements listed in #1-3 above, including required completion of a bachelor’s degree from an accredited 4-year institution with requisite GPA and major that relates to the area of responsibility when teaching (e.g., English, mathematics).

Over the longer term, the Council recommends the following actions be investigated and funded:

1. Review/Revision of “content” exam and associated professional standards for all areas for Secondary Certification to include broader range of stakeholders (Secondary school teachers and Liberal Arts faculty).
2. Expansion of the “Professional Development School” model to strengthen links between “content” being taught in universities with practice in the field and to introduce students interested in teaching careers to earlier clinical experience.
3. Expansion of the Golden Apple/Illinois Scholars program model to serve all regions of the state.

It is time that policy-makers consider that there is no quick-fix to the many real challenges to our education system, which include “environmental” factors of poverty, inadequate health care, and the cultural disenfranchisement of poor and minority populations in the state. Real solutions demand a kind of long-term outlook and conviction grown nearly impracticable in our political system. Yet a new set of standards to break the cycle of poor teacher quality presents part of such a long-term solution, and we invite the IBHE, the ISBE, and the Legislature to work together to put them in place. If such standards are put in place, ongoing progress of teachers in a program with such standards must be measured and verified, but it may be ten or more years before the real results of *reversing the current cycle* become apparent, when the *students* of the teachers prepared under higher standards over the next few years *themselves* go to college and some

become part of a new generation of teachers creating a more skilled workforce, a more engaged citizenry, and better quality of life for Illinois.

¹ See especially Arthur Levine, “Educating School Teachers” *The Education Schools Project* September 2006 and Heather G. Peske and Kati Haycock, “Teaching Inequality: How Poor and Minority Students are Shortchanged on Teacher Quality,” The Education Trust, June 2006. The Chicago *Sun-Times* series “Failing Teachers,” running from the fall of 2001 into the spring of 2002, documented problems with the preparation of certified professionals in the Chicago public schools.

² That is, if one of the major complaints of the Education Trust’s report is that the weakest teachers—specifically, those without sufficient content knowledge and without the pedagogical skills requisite to earning a “high quality” rating—are consistently “assigned” to the poorest schools, then the solution to the problem would seem not to be, as that report suggests, to move poorer and minority schools to the “front of the line” in choosing the best-prepared teachers. While this solution might help some Districts in the short term, it ignores the realities of the job market, where workers may choose where they apply. Equally unfeasible, at least in our current school-funding system, is the *Education Schools Project* recommendation that states themselves raise the level of teacher salaries on their own. While everyone agrees higher salaries would make teaching careers more attractive to talented college students currently choosing more lucrative professions, this solution is impeded in Illinois by a system of school funding based primarily on local property taxes.

³ States that already require future teachers to complete a liberal arts and sciences major include New Jersey, New York and California. For a “permanent” certificate, the state of New York actually requires candidates to hold an M.A. degree in the content area taught.

⁴ The Education Trust report laments one in three teachers in secondary low-minority schools has neither a college major or minor, “a low bar in terms of demonstrating knowledge of content.” For future elementary school teachers, the completion of a Liberal Arts and Sciences major (or strict equivalent) would guarantee skills currently lacking in large numbers of teachers in low-minority schools, according to the Education Trust report, including vocabulary, writing and critical thinking skills. It may also lead to an endorsement on their elementary certificate, thereby affording them specialized knowledge for strengthening K-9 schools. The Council also recommends reconsideration of Type 09 requirements (not necessarily additional courses but different ones) to include more concentration in Reading, Special Education and Teaching Second Language Learners.

⁵ For example, in 2003, the English/Secondary Education degree program at NEIU was increased from 36 credits to 51 credits. New required courses were geared specifically to the experience of those teaching in Chicago area schools, including upper level courses in Minority Literatures, Women Writers, and the Teaching of Writing in Secondary Schools. A course in Teaching English as a Second Language was also added.

⁶ Grade inflation or poor supervision have enabled lesser candidates to pass minimum grade-point requirements in fieldwork placements or student teaching, but it would be much less likely for such factors to affect an entire Liberal Arts major and the requisite Education course requirements.