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COMMENTARY

ARE YOU *HIGHLY QUALIFIED*? THE PLIGHT OF EFFECTIVE SPECIAL EDUCATORS FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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The phrase *highly qualified teacher* no longer means what it used to. Highly qualified teachers used to mean those who were fully certified and extraordinarily effective in teaching students. Now we must be cautious about using the term, because some fully certified and extraordinarily effective educators may no longer be *highly qualified* when guidelines for No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are applied. NCLB requires states to ensure their teachers are highly qualified by the end of school year 2005-2006.

According to NCLB, highly qualified teachers will have a bachelor's degree, be fully certified, and prove they know the content they teach. NCLB limits that content to specific core academic subjects (e.g., social studies, math, science). That is, special educators cannot consider their pedagogical expertise as content enabling them to be called highly qualified. Consequently, as states are implementing plans, per NCLB requirements, for how special educators attain highly qualified status in each core academic subject they teach to students with learning disabilities, it is disconcerting that some special educators who have provided excellent instruction in core academic subjects, learning strategies, and other pedagogical areas for years can no longer be called highly qualified unless or until they have met their state's criteria for *highly qualified*. This seems to imply that experienced and effective special educators are now unqualified (or merely qualified) to teach students with learning disabilities.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires that students with learning disabilities be provided access to the general education curriculum, participate in large-scale assessments, and receive instruction in the least restrictive environment. It is possible that such environments are staffed by general educators who are highly qualified in a core academic subject but not similarly highly qualified in the pedagogy of teaching that subject to students with learning disabilities. In this situation, highly qualified general educators who work with highly qualified special educators can improve their pedagogical knowledge and skills so that more students with and without disabilities learn. And yet special educators who know how to transform the content so that more students learn it may not be considered highly qualified!

Students with learning disabilities need highly qualified general and special educators who know how to transform and transmit the curriculum in ways that enable them to learn. It makes sense that special educators would know deeply the content they are teaching. Conversely, it makes sense that general educators who are considered

highly qualified in a core academic subject would be similarly highly qualified in the pedagogy of teaching that content to students with diverse learning needs, such as students with learning disabilities. That pedagogy of teaching has been the expertise and hallmark of highly qualified special educators for students with learning disabilities, and there is concern that this expertise may now receive less attention in teacher preparation programs.

Specifically, the concern is that teacher preparation programs may insert in their curricula a few core academic subject courses and delete a few courses on pedagogy for students with learning disabilities. In that connection, we must guard against solutions that enable beginning special educators to graduate fully certified and *highly qualified* on paper, but not in fact. Moreover, quick-fix solutions do not do justice to beginning special educators who need more than a few courses to be highly qualified for any given core academic subject and for pedagogy for teaching students with learning disabilities.

Parents, lawmakers, and others are already asking experienced and beginning special educators: Are you *highly qualified*? Teacher preparation programs are also being asked: Are you graduating *highly qualified* special educators? It is ironic that soon there will be many excellent beginning or experienced special educators who cannot be called highly qualified, and they will be helping *highly qualified* teachers do a more effective job of teaching students with diverse learning needs, including students with learning disabilities.

The phrase *highly qualified teacher* doesn't mean what it used to, because its meaning is now completely associated with NCLB requirements. The intent of NCLB is good and noble. So, too, are the actions of excellent special educators who must now earn the right to be called *highly qualified* again.

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