

Is traditional certification the best way to assure teacher quality?

Yes With teacher quality long recognized as the most powerful school-based factor in student learning, there is a profound irony in the argument that structures to assure teacher quality are irrelevant.

The goal of certification is to provide quality assurance—to ensure a level of competence among members of the teaching profession.

Critics of certification typically offer two kinds of arguments. The first is that traditional preparation programs are costly in time and dollars and have failed to provide evidence that they make a difference in teacher effectiveness.

This argument confounds programs with certification criteria. Weak teacher preparation programs certainly do exist, and they should either improve or close. Abolishing performance-based criteria for entry into the field would only remove one of the primary means we have of identifying these weak programs and allow them to continue.

That said, data have begun to emerge that show a connection between teacher preparation and student outcomes. A team of economists and educational researchers for the New York City

Teacher Pathways Project has found that particular design features of teacher preparation do make a difference in student achievement gains, whether in “early entry” programs (alternative programs that place candidates in classrooms before—not in lieu of—coursework) or more typical university-based programs. These elements include opportunities grounded in practice like close study of student work and thinking, and congruence between field placements and eventual teaching jobs.

The second argument is that lacking sure measures

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of teacher quality, our efforts are best spent on recruiting adults who have a commitment to students and a college degree in a targeted subject area. These critics assert that certification poses a barrier to meeting a looming teacher shortage, especially in subject areas of high need, e.g., math and science.

Quality teaching involves more than commitment and content. Teachers must possess not only solid subject matter knowledge, but also the ability to design learning experiences and organize subject matter in ways that

make the content meaningful to diverse groups of learners. They must recognize that students’ differing academic, behavioral, cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic histories inform student learning. Quality teachers build on diversity to connect students to subject matter. They search for and recognize typical patterns of student thinking and respond with carefully selected instructional tools to assist students in taking the next steps in learning.

These dimensions of good teaching are difficult to assess—but the answer is not to abandon the effort. Standards for licensure must correspond to effective practice.

Currently, research teams around the country (including Peabody) are working to design efficient measures that link teacher understanding and practice with student learning outcomes. Other groups are examining the implications of new assessment approaches for state licensure structures.

If we are to meet the teacher shortage effectively, such efforts are vital. We need teachers with high-level training and we need the confidence that they can meet student learning needs. Certification is more critical than ever.



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No The widely-publicized release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 compelled a sustained period of public interest in elevating achievement in American public schools. As student performance increasingly dominated education policy, state testing programs and outcome-based expectations proliferated. The trend culminated in 2001 with enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The new paradigm of test-based accountability in education largely marginalizes the current system of teacher certification, if not renders it irrelevant.

Over the last decade, researchers have undertaken numerous studies of teacher effectiveness by exploiting massive longitudinal files of student achievement data. These studies began with William Sander’s work in Tennessee and have expanded since to Texas and Florida and to the large school districts of Chicago, New York and San Diego. They show large variation in achievement test-score gains between classrooms and teachers, suggesting that teachers exert substantial and accumulating influence on student achievement. Indeed, one study demonstrated that a string of five above-average teachers can overcome the deficit typically reported

between economically disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers.

While researchers have found significant variation in teacher effects within school

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districts, and even within schools, they also have consistently found that these effects are highly idiosyncratic. That is, whether a teacher is successful at instilling learning is largely unrelated to the type of certificate the teacher holds, their education, or their licensing exam scores. On average, there is not much difference between certified, alternatively certified, and uncertified teachers, despite the presence of wide variation in teacher effectiveness within each of these pathways. Success in the classroom does not depend on the current process by which teachers are certified and the labor market is regulated.

This is not to say teacher certification programs are completely irrelevant. Teacher competency tests can screen out the academically incompetent or unscrupulous practitioner. Student-teaching can

start teachers on the road to learning the science of being a teacher. Criminal background checks can prevent the potentially dangerous from entering the classroom.

And, from the most general of perspectives, certification may protect the public interest by regulating the market if consumers lack expertise to judge quality of service.

Recognizing that existing certification practices are weak predictors of teacher effectiveness, and that teacher quality is the most important influence on a child’s education, the time has come to re-think how federal and state governments regulate the teacher labor market. Policy makers need to move away from regulating the market before a teacher enters the classroom. Instead, they should examine how a teacher performs in the classroom, while acknowledging that schooling is a multidimensional enterprise and should not rely on a single measure of student performance.

We invite readers’ ideas for future “Versus” topics. If you have ideas or wish to submit commentary, please send it to the Editor, Peabody Reflector, VU Station B #357703, 2301 Vanderbilt Place, Nashville, TN 37235-7703, or email reflector@vanderbilt.edu.