No Child Left Behind’s “Highly Qualified” Teacher: What Does It Really Mean?

Ronald A. Berk

DISCLAIMER:

This chapter, unlike the presentation upon which it is based, does not contain any corny music from TV programs or goofy demonstrations. The actual presentation began with the theme from CSI: Certification Seems Imminent, plus a demonstration comparing a "newbie" teacher, tripping to the theme from the Dick Van Dyke Show, and a teacher with 50 years of experience, staggering to the theme from Hawaii Five-O. Oh, did you miss a performance if you weren’t there. Anyway, you will have to furnish your own music as you plod through this No Child Left Behind material.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has generated considerable attention during this past year from every stakeholder group in the educational process, almost as much attention as the search for "weapons of mass destruction." But the primary focus has been on its implications for student testing. That time is over. Why shouldn’t teachers be just as anxious, stressed, phobic, and incontinent about test-taking as everyone else? What does the law require of every teacher in this country?

This chapter examines those specific requirements and their relationship to the current wave of teacher licensure/certification testing. It is organized into four sections: (1) What is a "highly qualified" teacher?, (2) Are new tests needed or will current tests satisfy the requirement?, (3) Do new psychometric analyses have to be conducted?, and

Ronald A. Berk is Professor of Biostatistics and Measurement in the School of Nursing at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland.
What Is a “Highly Qualified” Teacher?

NCLB uses the language “highly qualified” to describe the standard being set for all teachers, kindergarten through grade 12. For any elementary or secondary school teacher, it means someone who has "obtained full state certification as a teacher" or "passed the state teacher licensing examination" (Section 1119, p. 2). That's nice, but what does highly qualified really mean?

Elementary School Teachers

If you are a new (a.k.a. “newbie”) or entry-level elementary teacher, you must:

1. have a bachelor’s degree

   and

2. pass a “rigorous” state test including

   a. subject knowledge of the basic elementary school curriculum

   b. teaching skills (or pedagogy)

Are you scared yet? Good. You shouldn’t be.

What is the difference in requirements if you are not new, which translates into teaching between one and 50 years? In other words, through what hoops do all current teachers have to jump? Are you ready to read this? Okay, here it is: the same as a newbie. Yup, that is what I said. You must have a bachelor’s degree and pass the same state test of subject knowledge and teaching skills as the newbie.

Current teachers will have an alternative to the testing requirement when NCLB takes effect in 2005–2006. They can demonstrate competence based on a high, objective, uniform state standard of evaluation that:

   a. is set by the state for both grade-appropriate academic subject matter knowledge and teaching skills;
b. is aligned with challenging state academic content and student academic achievement standards and developed in consultation with core content specialists, teachers, principals, and school administrators;  
c. provides objective, coherent information about the teacher’s attainment of core content knowledge in the academic subjects in which a teacher teaches;  
d. is applied uniformly to all teachers in the same academic subject and the same grade level throughout the state;  
e. takes into consideration, but is not based primarily on, the time the teacher has been teaching in the academic subject;  
f. is made available to the public upon request; and  
g. may involve multiple, objective measures of teacher competency.

For elementary teachers, the previous two hoops may be more reasonable than seven. The decision is up them. The state must provide both options for demonstrating competence.

**Secondary School Teachers**

Newbie middle or secondary teachers must:

1. have a bachelor’s degree  
   and  
2. pass a rigorous state test in subjects to be taught  
   or  
   successfully complete an academic major through  
   a. a graduate degree  
   b. coursework for an undergraduate major  
   or  
   c. advanced certification/credentialing
"What in the world are you talking about?" you ask. I know it seems a little confusing.

The requirements boil down to this: If a teacher has a bachelor’s degree and an undergraduate and/or graduate major in the subject area in which he or she is teaching, the standard is met. If a teacher teaches in more than one area, additional major coursework must be completed. So one option is to take the necessary courses in the areas being taught. The second is to pass a state test in each of those subject areas. No pedagogy is required on any of the tests.

All other not-new secondary teachers must meet—you guessed it—the same standards as a newbie. They also have the same option as the not-new elementary teachers, which is to demonstrate competency according to the seven criteria listed previously, instead of taking a subject area test.

Are New Tests Needed or Will Current Tests Satisfy the Requirement?

Whether new tests are needed depends on the content of the current tests. Extant licensure tests based on state standards that measure subject matter and pedagogy at the elementary level and subject matter areas at the secondary level would meet the NCLB requirements. Since essentially all teachers (newbies and not newbies) will need to take the same tests with the same standards, current PRAXIS® and NES® customized tests will probably be adequate. In states where these tests are not in place, licensure tests will have to be built to NCLB specifications. At the secondary level, it is noteworthy that tests in all subject matter areas must be available, although the teachers are actually not required to take any tests. They may choose the coursework route instead.

Do New Psychometric Analyses Have to Be Conducted?

Nope! The content and performance standards are the same for ALL teachers. NCLB requires everyone to meet "entry-level" standards. There
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is no stipulation that different standards be set. This translates into the same passing score and validity and reliability evidence based on that score.

However, the law does not preclude the states and/or test contractors from gathering additional psychometric evidence or setting different passing scores, perhaps a higher one for experienced teachers. In fact, evidential validity related to the distributions of newbie and experienced teacher performances on any state test might reveal a "best" or "weighted" passing score based on probabilities of correct and incorrect (false positives and false negatives) classifications. For example, as illustrated in Figure 1, one might choose a single cutscore that optimally splits the two distributions by maximizing the probability of correct decisions or set a higher cutoff to minimize false positive errors.

The information on experienced teacher performance can permit a perspective on setting standards that previously was inaccessible. We should take advantage of this new data source to refine the standard-setting process and the "accuracy" of the pass-fail decisions being made, plus provide new and improved validity and reliability evidence to substantiate that process.

Figure 1
Optimal Cutscore for Newbie and Experienced Teachers to Provide Validity Evidence
What Are the Implications of Test Decisions from State to State?

Since NCLB is a federal law imposed on all states, there are at least two implications for practice that must be acknowledged and considered. First, there are no national standardized teacher licensure tests that will satisfy NCLB’s specifications. All decisions about test design, item format, content coverage, technical characteristics, and reporting reside totally in the hands of each state. Consequently, it is expected that every state will produce tests that differ from those in other states. They will differ in substance, form, and quality.

Second, given those differences, what happens if a teacher passes a test in one state and moves to another? There are three options available:

1. grant reciprocity;
2. grant reciprocity, conditional upon completion of courses or in-service programs related to curriculum content that is different from previous state; or
3. require passage of the state test.

These issues must be addressed before implementation of the testing program. The consequences of all testing need to be considered in the planning stage so that one is not caught in reactive mode, unprepared to deal with the possible fall-out.

Summary

How would a teacher tackle the NCLB requirements? To wind up this chapter on a positive note, let’s view the decision process in terms of an ice cream cone. How is that for positive? Unless, of course, you are lactose intolerant. Then it should be a sorbet cone! Figure 2 captures this image.
The diversity of all teachers from newbies to not-newbies in any state is represented in the ice cream as chips or sprinkles. They’re just "hangin’", waiting to make their decisions. When they are ready, they drip into the cone and follow the decision sequence. To be "highly qualified" they must answer the following questions:

1. Are you teaching at the elementary or secondary level? (Note: If any prospective or current teacher cannot answer this question, he or she should not pass GO, nor collect $200, but should consider another career!)

2. Do you have a bachelor’s degree? This is essential for both elementary and secondary teachers.
3. Do you need to take the state tests? All new elementary teachers must take the state test; secondary teachers may elect to take coursework at the undergraduate or graduate level related to subjects taught in lieu of a test, or they may take one or more tests.

Each stage in this process sinks deeper into the cone until eventually there is convergence on a decision to take one or more state tests that, combined with the preceding credentials, will satisfy the requirements for the label “highly qualified.”

Reference