From the Highly Qualified Teacher to the Highly Proficient Teacher

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A highly qualified teacher (HQT), as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), is based on a stepladder model, an incremental approach to adding credentials similar to scheduled step increases in salary. Our focus at the national and state levels, as driven by NCLB, has been on the highly qualified professional as defined by credentials and certifications. There is little doubt that the public feels comfortable knowing that its teachers are appropriately prepared as determined by scope and sequence of accepted professional training and coursework, and evidenced by the issuance of a certificate by a state agency. This approach is based on the provider’s internal process. But how can we be assured that this process will result in a better outcome for the consumer—in more successful results for students?

Authentication by Assessment and Accumulation

States have moved in the past 15 years or so to some form of assessment as part of the credentialing process. Basic skill tests serve as the gateway to teacher preparation programs and student teaching field experiences. Professional knowledge and academic discipline assessments are most often used to authenticate the preparedness for an initial credential/certificate in most states.

Typically, states have segmented subsequent certificates for teachers based on accumulation of continuing graduate school credit, completion of induction and mentoring programs, documentation of continuing professional development units, and the cumulative experience gained

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in the classroom. This is the case in Illinois where our teachers who are issued an Initial Certificate must progress over time to a Standard Certificate by demonstrating a portfolio of experience, CPDUs, graduate work, induction/mentoring programs, and experience under contract. In June 2004, 7,000 of our teachers who hold an Initial Certificate are expected to meet these new requirements for the Standard Certificate or be unable to continue under contract.

**Salaries as Snapshots of Quality**

This stepladder approach to credentialing/certification has been equated to a stepladder approach to salary increments for teachers as well. Time/experience in the classroom (year by year) equates to vertical progression on the salary guide. Guides usually have 12- to 17-year steps for years of experience on the vertical scale. Most salary guides are being compressed in fewer steps during the collective bargaining process to create more rapid advancement and powerful salary guides for teachers, in order to maximize the vertical scales.

Most salary guides have horizontal scales as well, so as teachers gain additional graduate credits (in some cases CPDUs) they move to a new salary scale for their level of education (B.A., B.A. and 15 credits, B.A. and 30 credits, M.A., M.A. and 15 credits, M.A. and 30 credits, M.A. and 60 credits, doctorate and other variations on the theme). These salary scales generally are created differentially, so that higher salaries are the result of the combination of experience and education.

Hence, the more highly credentialed a teacher is according to experience and education and certificate, then the better paid a teacher can expect to be.

We have provided parents and consumers a certain comfort level through hiring of credentialed teachers, by using this experience and education ratio, and by posting average teacher salary snapshots as an assurance of quality. For most states, the NCLB requirement of highly qualified teachers continues this tradition of equating certification/credentials with quality, and local districts point to salary ranges and the experience of their faculty as a point of quality.
More Is Not Always Better

For many years my wife would annually visit her physician in whom she had great faith. His walls were covered with diplomas and certificates, and he would proudly display mementos of the medical conferences he attended regularly. He had a long and distinguished career of ministering treatment to his patients for which he was well compensated over the years. When medical circumstances dictated a more sophisticated approach for treatment, my wife sought out not her long-term practitioner, but an individual whose performance level in the area of specialty was demonstrable. She studiously reviewed the credentials of the referred physicians and began to analyze their performance record in addition to their levels of preparation. The physician who was selected to care for my wife had demonstrated expertise, a track record of successful performance not measured by years of experience or simply by holding a certificate or a credential. Interestingly, this new physician of choice had considerably less experience than the family physician and other specialists, but had exhibited a high success rate with patients in his chosen field.

So how does this analogy relate to our profession of teaching?

Credential as Portal

Credentials/certificates serve as a point of entry to practice, to teach. The holding of a certificate in a profession is a given, a minimum. Continuing education and credentialing must be a necessary development in any profession. The "highly qualified" moniker must relate to a minimum threshold necessary to practice in the profession. However, the success rate or positive impact of the provider, the teacher, must be the critical feature in being considered highly proficient.

From Process to Result

Simply, the challenge and the questions must be posited: How do we move from the notion of the Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) to the Highly Proficient Teacher (HPT)? How do we pass through the tyranny of minimum processes and graduate to established results?
There is little argument that districts are struggling to meet the minimums of "highly qualified" in light of supply and demand in the marketplace. Rural schools and inner city schools have unique needs and vacancies. The variance of salary guides from one adjoining district to another, statewide district by district, and the perennial shortage of special education, math, science, and other specialty teachers contribute to vacancy rates.

For example, in Illinois a small rural high school has been looking to replace a retiring math teacher. The retiring teacher, after 35 years of experience, has a salary of $37,000. A nearby suburban school district is looking for a high school math teacher, offering $37,500 as a starting salary for someone without experience. There are districts about 15 miles away which have an average differential in salary at all steps of nearly $10,000. Is there any doubt as to why some districts have vacancies and are unable to meet the HQT standard? Nevertheless, I would modestly suggest that for those districts/schools having their full complement of highly credentialed teachers and as a national policy direction, we need to be thinking of ways to elevate the level of HQT to one of proficiency. How can this be done? Following are some thoughts.

**From Sanctions to Incentives**

Currently, NCLB is heavily weighted toward sanctions for non-performance: not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), etc. There is little evidence of any types of rewards for meeting or exceeding the established expectations. States must report their Highly Qualified Teacher percentages to the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and districts must inform parents if teachers are not meeting the HQT standards. But I have not found evidence of linked sanctions and rewards affiliated with this area of NCLB. I certainly am not recommending that any sanctions be applied. I am recommending that to take some of the bite out of NCLB, that a kinder and gentler approach may be incentives for districts and states to develop and implement the Highly Proficient Teacher Standard.
One way of doing so would be to add to the local salary guide a differential scale for those teachers who meet a Highly Proficient Teacher level. This stipend or lane (salary progression) would be a good incentive and would not be much different than the stipend given to those teachers who attain the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) Certification. (Note that this is another form of process-, not results-based certification of HQT). Incentive money from NCLB would be a boon to districts.

Another method of reward and incentive would be state sponsored (but federally supported, since most states do not have discretionary funds available due to tight budgets) stipends akin to the NPTSB stipends provided by many states to teachers who complete the process. The key, of course, would be the criteria used to establish HPT.

Portfolio as Benchmark

Much of the proficiency criteria must be associated with the measurable standards used in NCLB test scores, attendance, drop out rates, etc. But districts could go well beyond those minimum standards to establish benchmarks in virtually every discipline. I would suggest that the use of portfolios be the anchor for documentation. Accordingly, proficiency documentation could be expanded to district tests, teacher tests, student portfolios of progress, and so forth. Several Illinois districts have attempted to move in this direction.

As part of the state of Maryland’s partnership/takeover of Baltimore City Schools in 1997, legislation was written to require a performance based assessment of all employees as part of their annual evaluations. The purpose was to improve the performance of the students, schools, and system through accountability of results for its employees. In theory, future salary increments were to be tied to performance.

The design of the system had its merits and shortcomings. It attempted to focus on a core of students who were representative of each particular class and would be constant (to adjust for the mobility factor). Rubrics were developed to evaluate the portfolios. Sample portfolios in all disciplines and for all grades were developed to assist
teachers and evaluators. There was to be a team of evaluators so to afford a more objective rendering of performance.

As is often the case, with frequent turnover of superintendents, all of the additional ills of an urban district pressing for attention, and opposition to the program by the teachers’ union, this program was not fully implemented as designed. In 2003, it was disbanded.

There are other examples of districts which have ventured into this arena and lessons to be learned from their experiences. As with all innovations and experiments, timing is the key. Perhaps with the demands on schools and requirements for higher performance reaching an apex with NCLB, the need to move toward Highly Proficient Teachers as the next standard is an important policy direction. Perhaps the time is right. This time, the direction of this policy can be ably assisted by sophisticated technology, assessments, and research.

Professionalism Based on Results

My prevailing interest is to move our conversation and direction from lift-off to orbit, to move the direction of HPT to incentives, to rewards and not sanctions, to accelerate the profession to professionalism based on results and impact on the customer, and not the processes and credentials of the provider.