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California's neediest high school students have the least prepared teachers, study says

The good news: A steep drop in the total number of 'underprepared' teachers. The bad: Aspiring teachers aren't being taught how to emphasize critical thinking skills and 'real world' learning.

By Mitchell Landsberg

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The neediest students in California high schools are being taught by the least prepared teachers, a new study shows.

Fewer than half the principals in high-poverty schools said their teachers had the skills to encourage critical thinking and problem-solving among their students, while more than two-thirds of their counterparts in wealthier communities said their teachers possessed those abilities, [the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning](#) said in a study being released today.

The nonprofit center also found that teachers in the lowest-performing schools are more than twice as likely as those in the highest-achieving schools to be working without at least a preliminary credential.

The center's study, "The Status of the Teaching Profession 2009," is the latest to show that the most disadvantaged students don't have access to the same quality of teaching as those in more affluent, high-achieving schools.

The study did show signs of significant improvement in the preparation of California teachers and praised the state's ability to respond to shortcomings in the classroom. But it said the state's teacher training institutions haven't caught up to current thinking on education reform.

"This is kind of a good news, bad news scenario," said Margaret Gaston, president of the Santa Cruz-based center.

On the good-news side, the study found a steep decline in the number of "underprepared" teachers in California classrooms, from more than 42,000 in 2000 to fewer than 11,000 last year.

It found a decline, although not a large one, in the percentage of people teaching classes outside their area of expertise.

And it said the state had responded admirably to criticism that its teachers needed to have a greater command of their subject matter; the great majority now do.

The bad news: California's aspiring teachers aren't being taught what they need to participate in the latest round of high school reform, which emphasizes critical thinking skills and "real world" learning that prepares students for college and the workplace.

"We need to make sure the system is responsive to making sure that those teachers are adequately prepared to meet those challenges, and right now they're not," Gaston said.

The center's study was based in part on a statewide survey of 234 principals from randomly selected high schools, both traditional and charter.

The researchers also conducted case studies of 16 high schools in 14 districts. It did not identify the schools or districts.

David Sanchez, president of the 340,000-member [California Teachers Assn.](#), praised aspects of the study but criticized the methodology.

"I think the first thing that jumped out at me was that they didn't talk to teachers," he said. "They just based their report on what principals and administrators told them." (The researchers did interview teachers in the case study schools, but much of the data was based on the survey of principals.)

Sanchez acknowledged that it was "challenging" to attract qualified teachers to schools in impoverished communities. And he said he agreed with the need to improve teacher training, but wondered whether that was possible in the current economic climate.

"If you're willing to provide professional development and align it to the reform movement that's out there, that's wonderful," he said. "Let's find the money to do that."

Gavin Payne, chief deputy superintendent of the California Department of Education, said the study demonstrated that the state has the ability to retool teacher training but needs the will and the money.

"I don't think we're missing any of the cylinders in the engine," he said.

"We just need to come up with the fuel."