

National Public Radio

Lesson Plans: What Makes A Teacher Qualified?

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What is a good teacher and what goes into making one? Over the next year, NPR will try to answer those questions as we examine how teachers are evaluated, rewarded and disciplined.



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Everyone from President Obama on down seems to agree: a good teacher can make a huge difference in the life of a child.

American schools have been trying for decades to improve teacher quality, with mixed results. Over the next year, NPR will explore those efforts, and look at the latest crop of teachers entering the profession.

Teaching performance is difficult to improve in part because the profession is so large. With about 4 million teachers in the profession, efforts to boost quality tend to take place on the margins. Many efforts focus on expanding the pool of new teachers entering the workforce, and on encouraging more teachers to work with special education and low-income students.

Considerable blame has been directed at the certification process. State requirements tend to steer teachers to traditional teacher colleges and require specific hours of coursework. And since all states have different requirements, teachers often find it's best to go to college in their state. This helps create a hiring market that is very localized. Many teachers end up working close to where they themselves went to elementary or high school.

Nearly all states have opened up alternative routes to certification. These programs are supposed to make it easier for mid-career professionals to jump into teaching, while

getting credit for the leadership skills they bring with them. But many studies say these alternative routes have come to resemble the typical college route. Many are run by teacher colleges and tend to require unnecessary coursework that discourages career changers from making the switch.

Teaching fellowships have been gaining support, particularly in urban areas, as a way to ground new teachers in classroom experience. The New Teachers Project, founded in 1997 by current D.C.-schools chancellor Michelle Rhee, aims to lure career-changers from other professions into teaching. The program has been influential in helping to engineer quality training programs for new entrants. As part of our series, NPR will follow the path of a New Teacher corps member through her first year in a classroom.

By many accounts, teaching fellowships and programs such as Teach for America are helping to raise the standard for all teachers. As TFA becomes established, more of its members are staying beyond their two-year commitment and embracing teaching as a lifelong career. TFA has become an important model for shaking up the profession, but the program still supplies only a small percentage of new teachers each year.

The vast majority of teachers still come through traditional teacher colleges. These schools have been facing growing pressure to raise their standards. Because of the ongoing teacher shortage, teacher colleges find it easy to keep enrollment high. There are a number of proposals in different states meant to raise the standards for accepting students into teaching programs. But it's unclear that raising GPA or SAT requirements will result in more effective teachers.

Other countries have attacked the issue of teacher quality with some success. In Finland, only 15 percent of those who apply to teacher colleges are accepted. Teachers there receive three years of graduate training at state expense and don't have to worry about accruing huge amounts of debt. In contrast, American educators have talked a great deal about ways to raise the status of teaching, but the profession remains saddled with a stigma that discourages many talented people from signing up.

For years, teachers have been rewarded for getting advanced degrees. But some research suggests that teachers with master's degrees are no more effective in reaching their students. Systems that try to restructure their compensation schemes run into resistance from teachers, who fear they will have no assured way to increase their compensation. As a result, most teachers still get rewarded for advanced degrees, continuing education and for longevity in the system, even though there's no guarantee these factors will improve performance.

The Obama administration has raised the profile of these issues and has committed new money to programs that promise to improve teacher quality. In many ways, the stars are aligned for progress in teacher training, since there's agreement that better teaching is essential. But it will be tough to achieve far-reaching change in a profession that is so decentralized and so accustomed to making do with little.