

The Challenges of Teacher Qualification Policies in Rural America

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Federal policies are created and revised to ensure all students in America's public classrooms have excellent teachers. Scholarly researchers conclude teacher quality predicts educational success (Goldhaber, Lavery, & Theobald, 2015). Education regulations such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) created policies to ensure qualified, competent teachers teach in all of the nation's schools. These policies address achievement gaps and prevent discrimination. For over fifteen years, federal officials and states created and updated policies to provide quality teachers in every public school.

This paper is a review of federal educational policies on teacher quality and a critique on their effects on rural schools. Considering the rural impact of the education policies is important to me because 36% of Montana's children are educated in rural schools (NCES, 2014).

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2014), 606 of 818 Montana schools are classified as rural. Therefore, many Montanan teachers work in a rural setting. How do policy changes affect rural states like Montana? How has Montana addressed these challenges?

This paper will first summarize NCLB and its policy on highly qualified teachers. A review of challenges in hiring and retaining teachers in rural schools will then be presented, followed by a summary of Montana's actions and current status meeting requirements updated federal guidelines.

No Child Left Behind and the Highly Qualified Teacher

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 has gone through many changes since its inception. In 2001, the Bush Administration overhauled the ESEA and renamed it No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). NCLB ushered in the

“accountability era” and provided schools federal funding based on teacher qualifications (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015, p. 2). The NCLB act is broken into ten titles, with Title II addressing highly qualified teachers. NCLB (2001) stated:

The purpose of this part is to provide grants to State educational agencies, local educational agencies, State agencies for higher education, and eligible partnerships in order to —

(1) increase student academic achievement through strategies such as improving teacher and principal quality and increasing the number of highly qualified teachers in the classroom and highly qualified principals and assistant principals in schools. (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High Quality Teachers and Principals, 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 et seq.).

The scope of Title II of NCLB becomes even more important when coupled with the purpose of Title I of NCLB (2004), “Improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged.” (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: Improving The Academic Achievement Of The Disadvantaged, 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 et seq.).

Studies have shown students with the greatest needs benefit most from instruction by experienced, educated teachers (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006). The highly qualified teacher aspect of NCLB existed to ensure excellent teachers educate all students.

States are responsible for the governance of public education, but NCLB mandated each state improve the achievement of low-income, minority, and other students classified as “disadvantaged” (NCLB, 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 et seq). Guidelines for this mandate included placing highly qualified teachers in core subjects.

By 2006, core-subject teachers were required to have a bachelor's degree, state educational certification, and proof of competency to be classified highly qualified. (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006). The NCLB act offered states flexibility for meeting the requirements. States chose the type of testing to demonstrate competency, and teachers were permitted to use experience, expertise, and professional training to show competency, rather than have a degree in each subject area they taught (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

NCLB was specifically vague in defining of highly qualified creating fifty, unique versions of the term. Darling-Hammond and Berry (2006) noted teachers, newly-enrolled in a teacher preparation program, were labeled as highly qualified (p.15). The researchers argued "when the school tells them (parents) that their child's teacher is 'highly qualified'" parents do not think of someone who just enrolled in a teacher training program (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006, p. 15). While I agree with Darling-Hammond and Berry (2006) this interpretation is misleading, there were additional problems with the fifty different versions of the term. States such as Texas and Georgia allowed teachers to pass a multiple-choice test and have a college degree closely associated with the subject they were teaching (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006, p.16). Darling-Hammond and Berry (2006) cited Ohio used professional development to increase highly qualified teachers in core subjects from 82 percent to 93 percent in only two years (p. 15). Would these educators be considered highly qualified under another state's standards? Did the professional training create truly exceptional teachers for all of Ohio's students? Or did the training only allow Ohio to check a box on a federal form indicating they met the requirements, so they did not lose school funding?

On paper, NCLB appeared to correct the achievement gap through the scientifically-researched conclusion of placing excellent teachers in every classroom. Problems with the

policy and highly skilled teachers began to surface. One problem, not initially considered, was the legislation was directed towards the majority (urban and suburban schools and teachers) and disregarded the impact on rural schools (Hall, 2016).

The Rural Challenge to Meeting Policy Requirements for Teachers

When federal policymakers created NCLB, they did not realize the plight of rural schools in regards to staffing. Darling-Hammond and Berry (2006) stated the problem was not teacher shortage, but a “maldistribution of talent” (p. 16). Researchers can call it whatever they please, but the maldistribution was noticeable in Rural America. The difficulties of meeting the NCLB mandates added pressure to rural schools to find and retain exceptional educators.

Flexibility was added to NCLB to allow teachers in rural districts additional time to become highly qualified in multiple subject areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). This flexibility was in addition to the already-outlined flexibility. Even with states defining highly qualified, rural schools struggled to staff their schools, especially in science, math, and special education departments (Monk, 2007).

Hall (2016) argued policymakers were ignorant of rural schools’ unique qualities and challenges, rather than intentionally trying to harm rural schools (p.1). She concluded rural educational research in regards to the plight of rural teachers and policy effects was limited. Therefore, policymakers were not the only ones to blame for NCLB leaving out rural America (Hall, 2016). While I appreciate her appraisal, I elected and paid two senators and a representative to understand their rural constituents, so I cannot place blame on rural researchers.

While Hall’s assertion that research on rural education is limited may be partly correct, studies during NCLB’s heyday spell out the problems in rural education. The Goodpaster, Adedokun, and Weaver (2012) study stated "Rural school districts often struggle with attracting

and retaining high-quality teachers" (p. 9). Monk (2007) noted rural communities are impoverished, small, sparse, far from urban centers, and reliant on immigrant workers for agricultural industries. Monk (2007) stated, "Rural communities are also associated with aging population and with population and job loss" (p. 156). His depiction alone paints a picture of why teachers do not want to go to a rural place. These articles get to the root of why disadvantaged rural communities need the best teachers – they have a revolving door of new teachers, are isolated, have low socioeconomic status, and contain large minority populations.

Monk (2007) and Goodpaster et al. (2012) reached differing conclusions about how states and rural districts can staff schools to meet the federal policies. Monk (2007) prescribed education policy changes and wage increases to attract and keep qualified teachers in rural schools, "The drawbacks associated with rural school teaching could, in theory, be offset by higher wages or improved benefits, or both, thereby improving the ability of officials in these areas to recruit and retain teachers." (Monk, 2007, p.13). While this may be true, Monk (2007) did not have data to support these conclusions. Goodpaster et al. (2012) found "strong interpersonal relationships and community ties in rural communities" were necessary to keep quality educators in rural schools (p. 13). The researchers concluded building healthy relationships with the rural school and community retained teachers.

Darling-Hammond and Berry (2006) also had ideas on how to avoid the lack of quality educators in rural areas. They concluded the federal government needed to develop "grow your own" programs in rural areas because "many young teachers strongly prefer to teach close to where they grew up or went to school." (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006, p. 17). Their conclusion is similar to the Goodpaster et al. (2012) community ties conclusion. Darling-

Hammond and Berry's (2006) grow your own program would require considerable time and human and financial resources, which are at a premium in disadvantaged, rural areas.

In reviewing peer-edited research on how to attract highly qualified teachers to rural schools, I found scholars both made assumptions and actively studied what worked. Based on the articles, Hall's (2016) argument about ignorance towards rural schools has merit. If a lawmaker read Monk's (2007) paper, a very different conclusion could be reached about the ability to staff rural school than if a Congressperson reviewed the Goodpaster et al. (2012) study.

Montana's plan of action for meeting the teacher requirements is worth mentioning. According to Montana's Office of Public Instruction (OPI, 2006), 99% of core academic subjects were taught by highly qualified teachers in the school year 2004 - 2005. Unfortunately, schools that were not making annual yearly progress had higher percentages of core academic subjects taught by unqualified teachers (OPI, 2006). The schools not making annual yearly progress were either rural, on a reservation, or both. OPI (2006) laid out a plan to increase highly qualified teachers to 100% in core subjects. The plan included using job internships to put teachers in hard-to-fill positions, creating a website to list all open job positions and list applicants' credentials, providing professional development outreach, offering online professional development opportunities, and creating mentorship opportunities (OPI, 2006). According to the plan, Montana used federal funding to assist meeting the highly qualified teacher requirements and did create a "grow your own" program similar to Darling-Hammond and Berry's (2006) idea. Monk's (2007) wage increase or school policy change plan was not used, but Goodpaster et al.'s (2012) idea of inclusion in the community and school was evident in the mentorship aspect of the plan. Overall, Montana's plan seemed like a solid action plan supported by experts' opinions and education research. I am biased with my opinion because I am a recipient of an

education certification in chemistry received with mostly online professional development opportunities from a “grow your own” program.

Over fifteen years passed since the inception of NCLB and the highly qualified teacher requirements. Experts offered opinions and data about attracting teachers to rural schools to meet the federal policy requirement. Our state made changes and submitted an action plan to the federal government. With all the efforts, where do rural states stand on providing quality teachers to all their students?

The Current State of Highly Qualified Teachers in Rural America

In 2012, the Obama Administration allowed additional flexibility for meeting the NCLB requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In 2015, NCLB was formally replaced with ESSA. The federal requirements for highly qualified teachers were eliminated and any teacher certified by the state was considered qualified to teach (PSEA, 2016). The change did not equate to allowing states to slide on the requirement of ensuring all students had access to quality teachers, though. ESSA required state educational agencies to submit plans to the U.S. Department of Education that included “identifying gaps in access to excellent educators and to describe steps to eliminate the identified equity gaps” (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015, p.1). States were expected to ensure all students were taught by a state-certified educator.

Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) researched each state’s response to the updated federal request. They wanted to understand whether students in each state had access to qualified teachers by examining each state educational agency’s response to rural equity gaps. Only about half of the states studied rural-urban equity gaps, about half cited state policies to address the gap, but only about a third had both a review and state policy (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). The researchers found there were still difficulties sourcing rural schools with qualified teachers.

They cited the same information as previously discussed – remote areas and high levels of disadvantaged children. Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) referenced the same options “grow your own, financial incentives, communities of practice, and capacity building” to recruit teachers to rural areas (p. 3). A financial incentive, in the form of an expanded loan forgiveness program, from Montana was highlighted as an “exemplar” that “represents a robust sample of strategies that generally align with the best practices identified in the literature” (p.8).

The same problems that existed before NCLB’s required push to get highly qualified teachers to rural areas existed with ESSA’s reduced federal oversight. Updated state policy did not lessen the urban-rural equity gap and difficulties staffing rural schools with quality teachers remained. In fact, now only a third of states acknowledged and addressed the rural issue.

Conclusion

While educational research is recycling the same findings and opinions, headline articles in local papers suggest they either are not working or they are not allowed to work: “Montana educators cautiously hopeful for teacher recruitment, retention efforts in 2017” (Missoulian, 2017), “Help Wanted: Montana schools are struggling to find and keep teachers” (Billings Gazette, 2016), and “Teacher shortage in northern Montana has officials worried” (Billings Gazette, 2016). One school administrator stated even when highlighting four-day school weeks and financial incentives, candidates still do not want to work and live in rural areas (Billings Gazette, 2016). To complicate matters, Governor Bullock announced during a press conference on March 1, 2017; there is a possibility of closing a college campus due to budget constraints (Bozeman Daily Chronicle, 2017). Political threats are not supportive of grow your own teacher plans, quality educators for Montana’s most disadvantaged, or education in general.

The intent behind NCLB and the highly qualified teacher mandate was an important step forward in ensuring all students in America's public schools have access to the best teachers. Students in Lame Deer should take pride in knowing they have teachers as talented and capable as students in Boulder, Colorado. The reality over the past fifteen years, as shown in updated federal policy, research literature, and current news, concludes rural schools are still lacking access to great educators. Federal policy is constantly reminding states to address gaps in access. States should own and take pride in the responsibility of educating all their children. With Montana's fiscal crisis and educational budget shortfall, I agree federal policy is an important way to ensure our students get great teachers. Still, federal policy falls short.

While the federal policy allowed flexibility to the highly qualified teacher policy and states tried various methods to curb the problem, the fact remains recruiting and retaining teachers in remote, rural location is difficult. Congress on Capitol Hill with their Starbucks, Washington Post, and 4-G iPhones could not be further removed from the difficulties of finding a qualified educator in Circle, MT (which is the U.S. town furthest from a Starbucks). The comparison between the two locations is stark in my mind, so it is no wonder Montana's rural children are left behind.

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