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Law won't leave lousy teachers behind, either

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A federal law that kicks in next year requires every teacher to be "highly qualified." It's a cornerstone of President Bush's No Child Left Behind law.

How will Texas meet this daunting task? Apparently by rehiring the same teachers we've already got.

While lawmakers in Austin think they can improve achievement by increasing the number of charter schools and creating some sort of pay-for-performance program for teachers, other education reformers say the state ducked the one change that could have improved schools the most: putting more smart, caring adults in touch with kids.

To be sure, there's a lot that critics don't like about No Child Left Behind. It's proscriptive, relies heavily on standardized tests and is often at odds with state-level improvement efforts. Despite all that, many were hopeful that the law's requirement to put a "highly qualified" teacher in every classroom by 2006 would make a marked change in how kids are taught.

But instead of using the law to weed out lousy teachers or to at least funnel mediocre ones into high-quality development programs, most states – including Texas – took the easy way out, according to those who have watched states implement the law.

What's emerged is a rating system under which nearly all teachers can be deemed "highly qualified."

In Texas, very few of the state's 289,000 classroom teachers will be unable to meet the law's mandate, said Holly Eaton of the Texas Classroom Teachers Association.

So, there won't be mass firings next year of bad teachers or the hiring of thousands of good ones?

"Probably not," Ms. Eaton said.

A report from the National Center for Teacher Quality noted: "One cannot underestimate the extent to which states' standards, with very few exceptions, have failed to live up to the spirit of [the law's] teacher quality provisions." The report went on to say that the states have created "little more than an elaborate restatement of the status quo."

In Texas, here's how it will work:

The first hurdle is to ensure all teachers have at least a bachelor's degree; 98.9 percent of them already do. Second, all teachers must have passed the state's certification test in the subject they're teaching; an estimated 70 percent of them already have.

Meet those two requirements, and you're automatically "highly qualified."

However, if you're enrolled in an "alternative" teacher certification program, you don't have to meet the college degree requirement. Those teachers will be deemed "highly qualified" anyway, so long as they pass the state certification test.

The few teachers who can't be deemed "highly qualified" by the degree and certification criteria can instead submit their teaching experience and college coursework for approval. Under this part of the plan, teachers need to accrue 24 points to earn the "highly qualified" label.

Here's how they'll do it:

First, teachers get one point for every year they've taught. They can earn half of their 24 points in this way, so any teacher with 12 years of experience is halfway home.

Second, teachers will earn one point for every hour of college coursework they've taken, so long as it's related to the subject they teach. For example, a history teacher who took college classes in government, history, geography and economics would earn 12 points. Since most state teacher colleges require their students to take two years of liberal arts classes, points under that part of the plan could add up fast.

Finally, teachers who are still short of their 24 points can fill in the gaps with the professional development classes many districts already require them to take.

Ms. Eaton, of the state teachers group, said Texas created this point system specifically to retain veteran teachers who entered the profession under old state certification rules no longer in place.

State officials didn't want to force those teachers to take the tougher re-certification test, she said, and so they created a system with enough leeway so as not to "drive off real experienced teachers, because they're valued."

What's sad, critics of such plans say, is that Texas did a better job than most states. The same National Council on Teacher Quality report that blasted states generally gave Texas a grade of B for this program. Only seven states got a better grade – which leads some to believe that Texas got it right.

"Hey," said Ms. Eaton, "we were one of the top eight states."

To read the full report, go to www.nctq.org/nctq/images/housse_report_2.pdf

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