

COMMENTARY

Another Response to the Daunting Challenge of Teacher Evaluation

AUTHOR

[David N. Plank](#) | Stanford Graduate School of Education

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[Alan Daly's commentary](#) illuminates some of the critical but vexing questions that surround the evaluation of individual teachers, but it also casts light on the current policy controversy surrounding the question of what it means to be a “highly qualified” teacher. The controversy has arisen in light of a recent act of Congress, passed in response to a California court decision, that declared that teachers without full state certification are to be considered “highly qualified” for the purposes of NCLB.

In his post, Alan draws attention to the importance of social capital in the performance of schools and teachers. As he notes, teachers who begin their professional lives in schools where they are surrounded by engaged and supportive colleagues are likely to be measurably more effective than those who are placed in classrooms to sink or swim on their own, regardless of any differences in individual talent or commitment.

The new bill will have consequences both for human capital and for social capital in schools—and the consequences for social capital are likely to be far more damaging. On the human capital side, the bill declares that teachers pursuing alternative paths to the classroom (including those from Teach for America) who have not fulfilled state certification requirements will be treated as “highly qualified” for the purposes of federal education policy. The evidence on what defines a highly qualified teacher is equivocal at best, and state certification is hardly a guarantee of competent performance in the classroom. In the absence of strong evidence that certification makes a difference for teaching effectiveness, treating uncertified teachers as “highly qualified” is not that big a deal.

On the social capital side, though, the recent Congressional action is likely to do serious damage, for two closely related reasons. First, the California Education Code privileges seniority in decisions about teacher layoffs, and contracts in most California school districts include a “last in, first out” rule. Second, as Susanna Loeb and others have shown, inexperienced and intern teachers in California are disproportionately found in the most challenging schools. As a result, teacher layoffs in the current fiscal crisis have had their greatest impact in schools serving students with the greatest needs, with some schools obliged to lay off as many of half of their teachers.

One of the goals of the lawsuit that precipitated the recent bill was a more equitable distribution of teachers across schools, to ensure that the burden of teacher layoffs was fairly shared. By taking away one of the levers that might have helped to bring about a fairer and more stable distribution of teachers, Congress has made it much harder to protect the least advantaged schools and students from the disruption of layoffs. It is arguable whether the bill will affect the distribution of individual teaching talent much, but it is virtually certain that it will further diminish social capital in the schools where it is most needed, and in shortest supply.

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Stanford Graduate School of Education

520 Galvez Mall, Suite 444

Stanford, CA 94305

Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org

