Will New Teacher Equity Plans Get Closer to the Mark?

By Kimberly D. Charis

In many US public schools, race and socioeconomic status still determine the quality of a student’s educational experience. Unqualified and inexperienced teachers are disproportionately concentrated in schools with the highest number of low-income students and students of color.1 If state, district, and local education leaders are serious about upholding America’s core value of equal opportunity, they must ensure that every student, regardless of race or family income, is taught by qualified and experienced teachers, particularly in core subjects.

The US Department of Education has long sought ways to address the problem of teacher equity. In 2014 it issued new guidelines for states’ teacher equity plans, which are due back to the department on June 1, 2015.

According to the department’s Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) on teacher equity, nearly 96 percent of the nation’s public school teachers are licensed and certified, yet over half a million black students attend schools where more than 20 percent of teachers have not yet met state certification and licensure requirements (figure 1). Access to experienced teachers also appears to be limited for all students of color. Black, Latino, American Indian, and Native-Alaskan students are more likely than white students to attend schools with higher concentrations of first-year teachers (figure 2).2

Last year, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that for the first time the combined percentage of minority students—Latinos, black, Asian, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans—is greater than the percentage of white students in public schools.3 Immigrant trends and birth rates will likely cause the number of minorities to increase, creating a greater demand for skilled, culturally competent teachers.

BACKGROUND

The 2014 guidelines are not the department’s first attempt to nudge states toward greater teacher equity. In 2006 it asked state education agencies (SEAs) that received Title I, Part A grants to develop equity plans in order to meet the highly qualified teacher (HQT) provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. In order to be in compliance with the law, states needed to address equity in four areas:

- whether low-income students were more likely than their peers to be assigned to unqualified or out-of-field teachers in core academic courses;
- whether minority students were more likely than their peers to be assigned to unqualified or out-of-field teachers in core academic courses;
- whether low-income students were more likely than their peers to be taught by inexperienced teachers; and
- whether minority students were more likely than their peers to be taught by inexperienced teachers.4

Most state plans “missed the mark” in 2006, according to education and civil rights groups.5 Only Tennessee, Ohio, and Nevada submitted comprehensive policy-based plans that covered collection of equity data in the four areas. Nevada went a step further than what was required, including equity plans from two local school districts with the highest percentages of low-income and minority students in the state.

In a renewal of efforts to eliminate the equity problem, the department issued new plan guidelines in July 2014 and established a technical assistance center to help states develop and implement their plans, which are due June 1. SEAs are to collaborate with state and local stakeholders to craft these plans, including state boards of education, local education agencies, school administrators, and teachers. The plans must meet the following requirements:6

- Identify equity gaps by defining key terms (e.g., unqualified teacher, inexperienced teacher, out-of-field teacher, minority student, poor student).
• Calculate equity gaps in key areas.
• Provide sources of data used to identify each area that has an equity gap.
• Provide documentation of the steps the SEA took to consult with key stakeholder groups about the state plan.
• Provide an explanation for the likely causes of the identified equity gaps.
• Describe the SEA’s plan to eliminate the identified gaps that includes timelines for implementation and strategies to support local education agencies.
• Develop a state evaluation plan that measures progress toward eliminating the gaps.
• Describe how and when the information will be publicly reported.

STATE POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There is a distinct role for state boards of education in their state’s teacher equity planning. Boards with rule-making authority should review SEA data annually to ensure that districts are employing only experienced and licensed educators to teach core subjects. Boards should also review the data to find out where equity gaps exist and work with local and school leaders to ensure that policies and practices promote the equitable distribution of great teachers. Careful attention should be paid to high-needs schools and those with the highest number of minority students to make sure that novice and unlicensed teachers are not disproportionately represented.

State boards also have unique convening and questioning power they can employ to build consensus among state, local, and school leaders about the types of professional development policies and programs that best prepare teachers and leaders to serve in high-needs schools. In some states, teachers working in schools with the highest enrollment of black and Latino students earn $5,000 less per year than their colleagues working in the same district at a school with a low percentage of black and Latino students.7

Although most high-needs schools tend to have a larger population of minorities, insufficient resources, and limited opportunities for professional development, there is no justification for such a disparity. State boards of education, in partnership with SEAs and local districts, should figure out how to provide experienced, committed teaching professionals with financial and nonfinancial incentives to serve in these areas. According to the department’s 2013–14 data, states spent only 3 percent of Title II, Part A funds designated for improving academic achievement through professional development on programs that focus on recruitment and retention of highly qualified personnel.8

State boards of education are integral to the governance of public education. Operating as a lay body over state education, they serve as an unbiased broker for evidenced-based policymaking based on the best interest of students and the public and should be considered a vital partner in every state and local effort to eliminate inequities and close achievement gaps.

RESOURCES

To strengthen the capacity of state boards of education to work with SEAs to close the teacher equity gap, the National Association of State Boards will host a May 14, 2015, webinar on teacher equity (http://www.nasbe.org/webinar/how-can-state-policy-makers-ensure-equitable-access-to-excellent-educators/). Other useful resources include the following:


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NOTES


4. Office for Civil Rights, “Civil Rights Data Collection.”


7. Office for Civil Rights, “Civil Rights Data Collection.”