

8-19-2009

What is Highly Qualified for Arkansas Teachers?

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Citation

Jensen, N. C., & Ritter, G. W. (2009). What is Highly Qualified for Arkansas Teachers?. *Policy Briefs*. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/oepbrief/78>

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In response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, state departments of education, including the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), established rules to define a “highly qualified” teacher (HQT). While the spirit of this provision is clear and reasonable, the devil is, of course, in the details. That is, what exactly does *highly qualified* mean? Observers had good reason to be suspicious early on when many states claimed to have 95% or more of teachers being highly qualified. (For instance, according to Education Commission of the States, 100% of North Dakota teachers are considered highly qualified and 14 other states, including Arkansas, are at the 99% mark.) In response to these suspicions, state policymakers, in Arkansas and elsewhere, have been working to make adjustments, trying to strike the right balance between a law that is meaningful and one that is practical.

In this policy brief, we aim to summarize the current rules (along with the proposed changes) that govern highly qualified teachers in Arkansas.

OVERVIEW OF ARKANSAS HQT PROVISIONS

First, all teachers must have a bachelor’s degree and an Arkansas teaching license in order to be considered “highly qualified.” Teachers must also display subject matter competency; evidence of subject matter competency can be presented in various ways for new and veteran teachers. New early-childhood teachers are required to pass the Praxis II assessment while new teachers in the middle or secondary levels can either pass the Praxis II assessment or be certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS).

Veteran teachers have a bit more flexibility within the HQT rules. Experienced teachers who have not met the Praxis or the NBPTS requirements can show evidence of being highly qualified by earning 100 points on the ARHOUSSE, or the Arkansas High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation. According to the ADE, ARHOUSSE is “*a survey of criteria used to determine whether a veteran teacher demonstrates competence in the core academic subject area(s) he or she teaches.*”

The ARHOUSSE survey lists several areas in which a teacher can score points. For example, if a teacher has passed a content test (such as a Praxis or other non-licensure test) the teacher receives 50 points. A teacher also receives points for content based professional development; college coursework in the content area; presentations made and conferences attended in the last five years; for being on LEA, state, or national curriculum committees; and teaching experience in the content area.

How Can Arkansas Improve “Highly Qualified” Requirements?

Based on these requirements, being highly qualified essentially means that a teacher is certified. According to the ADE, to obtain a teaching license one must have a bachelor’s degree and successfully complete the Praxis I through III examinations; these are the same requirements used to identify “highly qualified” teachers. It appears that the highly qualified status is a redundant measure, since it does not go much beyond teacher certification and state required activities. So what then can be done to improve the state’s “highly qualified” teacher requirements?

1. *Arkansas policymakers should ensure that licensing exams are connected with high quality, and we should ensure high levels of achievement on the Praxis exam.*
2. *Where we allow veteran teachers more flexibility to show they are highly qualified, we should focus on eliminating redundant provisions.*
3. *We must keep in mind that the ultimate goal of teaching is to foster student learning.*

Rigorous Licensing Exams

The “highly qualified” guidelines rely heavily on the Praxis licensure tests. If a teacher has passed the Praxis II, that teacher is considered highly qualified. However, the minimum score required to pass the exam has been set much lower than any other state. A recent report published by the Education Commission of the States highlighted the cut scores used for the Praxis II assessment of teacher content knowledge in mathematics. In this report, Arkansas was shown to

have the lowest cut score of any state, meaning Arkansas has the lowest bar for our teachers on the Praxis II math content assessment.

A licensure test requirement can be a useful assurance of teacher quality, as long as the exam is rigorous and focused on important content, and the standards are set high enough to recognize a depth of knowledge in the content. It would be helpful if the state provided documentation on the rigor of the Praxis exams and raised the cut score for the content assessments. In this way, we can more readily identify those teachers who are truly “highly qualified.”

Eliminate Redundant ARHOUSSE Provisions

It appears that some of the categories on the ARHOUSSE may not be good indicators of teacher quality. For example, teachers can receive points on the ARHOUSSE for items that are required by the state already, such as professional development. Teachers can also receive points for attending and/or giving presentations at conferences or for being on various school committees. These activities can be beneficial, but they do not necessarily provide evidence that a teacher is highly effective, and may in fact be activities that take the teacher away from regular classroom time or valuable classroom preparation time.

Focus on Improved Student Learning

The most direct measure of teacher effectiveness might be measured by improvements in achievement levels of students. However, none of the requirements for becoming a highly qualified teacher focus on how well students do in a teacher’s classroom. Averaging the growth of a veteran teacher’s classes over a series of several years may be a thoughtful addition to this process, as we could more accurately identify which teachers are indeed the most qualified at doing what we want them to do: raise student achievement.

CONCLUSION

We applaud Arkansas for taking steps towards having highly qualified teachers in the classroom. However, improvements could be made to the guidelines to more accurately identify what constitutes being a highly qualified teacher. Perhaps Arkansas could take the lead and create a meaningful tool to measure teacher effectiveness and know more confidently how many of our teachers are highly qualified, rather than a tool that repeats the teacher certification requirements. We could start by linking student achievement and

growth to teachers, which happens to fit under the education reform areas (data systems to support instruction; good teachers and leaders) that must be addressed for the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund and Race to the Top.

If we are going to provide teachers with extra compensation for being highly-qualified, perhaps we should not only more accurately identify which teachers are highly qualified, but also encourage these teachers to demonstrate their merit above and beyond what is already expected of them.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Rules Governing “Highly Qualified” Teachers:
Arkansas Department of Education

http://arkansased.org/rules/pdf/pending/hqt09_pending.pdf

The Latest on States’ ‘Highly Qualified’ Teacher Counts: Education Week

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/teacherbeat/2009/08/sates_highly_qualified_teachers.html

The Progress of Education Reform: Education Commission of the States

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/81/38/8138.pdf>

RECENT PROPOSED CHANGES

There were a few changes recently proposed to the rules. One of these is the proposal to waive the requirement for a state teaching license for charter schools. Some charter schools are granted a waiver of licensure requirements, and therefore teachers in those schools would still be considered “highly qualified” without a state teaching license. There were also minor changes, such as the number of ARHOUSSE forms.

The pending rules can be found at:

http://www.arkansased.org/rules/rules_pending.html

A public hearing is scheduled for August 25 at 1 pm in the auditorium of the Arch Ford Education Building. Public comments are due by September 7 and can be e-mailed to Frank Servedio (frank.servedio@arkansas.gov).