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Veteran teacher on what 'highly qualified' really means

By [Valerie Strauss](#)

This was written by educator Anthony Cody, who worked for 24 years in the Oakland schools, 18 years teaching science at a high-needs school and six years as a mentor and coach of teachers. He is a National Board-certified teacher. This post appeared on his [Education Week Teacher](#) blog, [Living in Dialogue](#).

By Anthony Cody

As Congress wrestles with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), they have a chance to address the issue of [teacher quality](#) once again. The Coalition for Teaching Quality -- 82 organizations representing civil rights, parent, community, disability, and education advocates -- have [come together to demand](#) that Congress re-commit to the objective that all children should have a [well-prepared teacher](#).

[No Child Left Behind, the current version of ESEA](#), brought us a federal mandate for "highly qualified teachers" for all students. But after that law was passed, [groups like Teach For America pushed for exceptions](#) to be made, so that their recruits, with five or six weeks of summer training, could be considered "highly qualified." Now, Congress has a chance to revisit this issue. Will they choose a definition that has some meaning this time? A [letter released yesterday](#) from the Coalition for Teaching Quality yesterday states:

Although the proposal appears to retain NCLB's "highly qualified teacher" requirements, the new definition of "highly qualified" weakens the standard so much as to make the phrase virtually meaningless and its protections for at-risk students nearly nonexistent. In this proposal, teachers are defined as "highly qualified" if they have just enrolled in an alternative certification program, even if they have completed little or no training and have met no standard of competence.

This is an area where I have direct experience. In Oakland, where I worked for the past 24 years, our student population is diverse and challenging, and deserves the attention of the most experienced and expert teachers possible. However, due to sometimes difficult conditions and low pay, we have a very high turnover rate for our teachers. Although [turnover greatly diminished](#) when teacher pay was increased a decade ago, the high costs of an urban district did not allow that pay level to persist. Pay was cut, and the shortages and high turnover returned. At that time the district turned to [Teach For America](#) and other organizations that recruit and prepare new teachers. The district enters contracts with these groups, setting aside positions that will be filled by them, and paying them in the neighborhood of \$4,000 per teacher, to offset the cost of recruitment and training. In exchange, these groups guarantee there will be teachers for these classrooms, which might otherwise be empty.

This solution solves a major headache for the district. Classrooms lacking a teacher are a nightmare in the fall. They must be taught by substitutes, and are often out of control. Students and parents are very unhappy, and the district gets a lot of flak. These interns are also at the bottom of the pay scale, so the district can save money.

Unfortunately, [although Congress has declared](#) such teachers "highly qualified," common sense tells us they are not. A six week summer training does not a teacher make. These novices are hardworking and well-intentioned, but they are not very effective their first year. By the end of their second year they are getting their feet on the ground. But this brings us to the second major flaw with this approach. After their second year, half of these teachers have left Oakland. Three years after they begin, 75% of them are gone. That means many of our students, year after year, are served by teachers who lack the depth of experience needed to be fully effective.

And I have to add in one key issue that is related to this. In 2005, Linda Darling-Hammond released [a study](#) that found that student achievement was better for teachers with more formal preparation. [Teachers](#) who were in alternative certification programs, who had not gone through teacher training, had poorer student performance, on average. The problem with this study, from my point of view, was that it used test scores as its means of measuring the differences between teachers. Test scores are subject to gaming, meaning intense focus on test preparation, which robs the scores of real value as an indicator of good teaching.

There was a quick and decisive reaction to this research from [Teach For America](#) and other alternative certification programs. Enter the classroom of a TFA intern teacher, and you are likely to find a large poster that says "Our Big Goal, 80% mastery." You are likely to find student test scores posted on the wall. TFA coaches began focusing almost entirely on data with the teachers they were supporting. This translated into an intense focus on test preparation. I had a TFA director ask me if I could provide her with all the questions to the District's science benchmark exams, so their teachers could focus their instruction on the right concepts (a request I declined). Clearly, Teach For America had decided that their interns would have the best test scores possible, so they could no longer be faulted for being "ineffective" by that all-important set of indicators.

I had one mentee who was teaching Biology a couple of years ago. Her students were not doing very well on her weekly tests, and she was worried they would likewise do poorly on the state exams in the Spring. Her TFA coach advised her to shift her instruction so that every classroom assignment would resemble a test. Every day for a while, her students got worksheets with multiple choice and short answer questions. Their test scores went up, but they were bored, and after a few months of this, she shifted to a more project-based approach.

So when I say these interns are "ineffective," I am not simply speaking of test scores. I am speaking of a broader range of teaching abilities, many of which take several years of training and experience to develop. The most disturbing thing to me about the dependence of many of our high-poverty schools on poorly trained interns is the level of turnover, which means students may get novice teachers year after year, and there may not be that critically valuable reservoir of experienced teachers available at the school to nurture, support and serve as role models for these beginners.

This is most certainly an issue of equity. The schools of Berkeley and Piedmont, more affluent communities bordering Oakland, do not find it necessary to hire interns like this. Parents there would not tolerate it. Oakland is largely poor, with high numbers of African American, Latino and Asian immigrants and special education students. We should have the most highly qualified teachers to respond to the needs of these students. Instead, we have had [Congress creating strange definitions](#) of "highly qualified" teachers, so as to allow us to continue to use poorly trained high-turnover interns, almost entirely in schools of high poverty.