



Congress applies temporary fix to “highly qualified” teacher issue

By Tom Chorneau
Monday, January 03, 2011

Even with recent action in Congress to expand the definition of a “highly qualified” teacher, expectations are the issue is likely to resurface in the coming debate over the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act.

As part of a budgetary continuation resolution adopted just prior to the Christmas holiday, members of both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives voted to formally expand the “highly qualified” designation to apply to participants in alternative teacher certification programs.

A federal appeals court last summer had invalidated regulations from the U.S. Department of Education that allowed school districts to classify teachers still enrolled in ~~C~~internship¹ programs as “highly qualified.” The designation is critical because districts are also required to report to parents and the community how many teachers they employ who do not meet the standard.

Rep. George Miller, D-California, who helped shepherd the legislative change into a budgetary continuing resolution, said in a statement that the court decision would create “major and unpredictable disruptions to schools across the country” if it was allowed to stand.

Miller noted, however, that Congress still needs to take a closer look at the question.

“The language included in the (continuing resolution) is only the beginning of the conversation about the shift we need to make in our schools in regards to teachers and the measures of teacher quality,” Miller said. “I look forward to continuing our efforts to rewrite ESEA in the next Congress.”

John Affeldt, managing attorney for Public Advocates who represented a coalition of community groups that brought the court complaint against the federal regulations, criticized the Congressional revision as lowering the nation¹s teaching standards.

“The problem is that actual parents and students in schools where these alternative route trainees teach don’t want their classrooms to be the exclusive training grounds,” he said in a statement. “They also want the disclosures that NCLB promises as to which teachers have been fully prepared to teach their children and which haven’t.”

Alternative certification, which allows participants to serve as a teacher of record in a classroom while completing final coursework, is often utilized by second-career professionals looking for an opportunity for community service.

Supporters of the system say alternative certification programs are a key source of teachers for hard to fill slots often in low-performing urban settings. Critics say, in fact, that too many of the “novice” teachers are concentrated at low-income schools.

Catherine Kearney, president of the California Teacher Corps, which represents the state’s 70 alternative certification programs, has argued that the majority of the second-career teachers has a wealth of life and professional experience before coming into the classroom and over time have proven to be an enormous resource for schools.

After five years, more than 80 percent of teachers coming from alternative programs are still on the job. They also boast that the programs have over the past seven years placed more than 55,000 into California public schools - often into hard to fill classrooms of inner city schools.

She said the merits of the program will only be highlighted in any Congressional debate.