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## Highly Qualified Teachers and Special Education: Several State Approaches

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### INTRODUCTION

Recent research demonstrates that teacher quality has a greater impact on student achievement than any other educational factor. Yet there is concern that overall teacher quality is variable, and hard-to-staff schools (i.e., high poverty and minority schools) have an even more difficult time recruiting and retaining quality teachers. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) both mandate “highly qualified teachers” in public school classrooms.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this document is to:

- briefly describe the requirements for highly qualified teachers (HQT) as established in NCLB and IDEA;
- identify how states are supporting special education teachers to meet these requirements; and
- offer policy recommendations generated by the National Center for Special Education Personnel and Related Service Providers (Personnel Center) and the Center for Improving Teacher Quality (CTQ) at the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

This activity was completed as part of a cooperative agreement between Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) and the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

### LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND

NCLB created for the first time a national expectation regarding the qualifications of teachers in public schools. The law mandated that local education agencies (LEAs) ensure all teachers

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<sup>1</sup> The sole exception to this would be in the case of charter schools that dictate otherwise.

providing instruction in core academic subjects in Title I schools be “highly qualified.” To be highly qualified, teachers must hold a bachelor’s degree, have full certification or licensure and demonstrate competence in the core academic subject(s) they teach [34 CFR §200.56(b)(2-3)]. Core academic subjects include English, reading, language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history and geography [34 CFR §200.55(c)]. NCLB established that all teachers hired before July 1, 2003 are considered “not new” or “veteran” and those hired after this date are “new” [34 CFR §20.55(a)]. States were given a special provision for veteran teachers to meet the highly qualified mandates by meeting high objective uniform state standard of evaluation (HOUSSE) developed by the state [34 CFR §200.23(c)(ii)].

IDEA also has specific requirements for special education teachers to be “highly qualified” in the core academic subject(s) in which they provide direct instruction that mirror NCLB requirements. According to IDEA, all special education teachers must be highly qualified, have full certification in special education and demonstrate competence in the core academic subject(s) they teach<sup>2</sup> [20 USC 1401 §602(10)(B)(i)]. Under both laws, participation in an alternative route to certification equates to full certification for this purpose.

## **NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF IMPLEMENTATION OF HQT PROVISIONS**

As of February 2006, when the *National Assessment of Title I Interim Report* was completed, 41 states had met the requirement to test the content knowledge of new teachers and 47 states allowed veteran teachers to demonstrate subject-matter competency through HOUSSE. The majority of teachers across the country have been designated as “highly qualified” based on state-reported data. However, students in schools that have been identified for improvement or have high concentrations of poor and minority students were more likely to be taught by teachers who were not highly qualified than were students in non-identified schools. As of early 2007, all except eight states’ HQT plans had been approved by the U.S. Department of Education.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

Project Forum staff surveyed states in November 2006 to determine which strategies were being used by states to support their special education teachers to become “highly qualified” as required by NCLB and IDEA. Strategies they were asked about included:

- testing of teachers;
- changes to preservice programs;
- changes to special and/or general education teaching standards including teacher certification and program approval standards;
- changes to public school service delivery patterns (e.g., collaborative teaching); and
- changes to inservice (e.g., professional development to address content area deficiencies or preparation for state tests).

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed summary of IDEA regulations pertaining to HQT, visit the following website:  
<http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/%2Croot%2Cdynamic%2CTopicalBrief%2C20%2C>

Thirty-eight states responded to the survey. An interview protocol was then developed in collaboration with the Personnel Center and CTQ. Six states that represented a variety of strategies were selected for follow-up interview: *Alabama, Alaska, Idaho, North Carolina, New Hampshire* and *New Jersey*.<sup>3</sup> Interviews were then conducted with special education staff and/or licensure staff; and transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti, a software program designed for use with qualitative data. Findings are reported in the following section of this document.

## FINDINGS

### Overview

The six states interviewed use a variety of strategies to prepare special educators to meet HQT requirements. Some states have taken a comprehensive, systems-wide approach to meeting HQT requirements, whereas other states have taken a more piecemeal approach. Significantly, most interviewees noted that they tend not to distinguish between strategies for meeting the HQT requirements for general education teachers and for special education teachers and stressed the importance of holding *all* teachers accountable to the same standards. In the words of one, “If you directly instruct, you’ve got to be HQT, no matter who you are.”

### Strategies for Meeting the Requirements of HQT

#### *Testing of Teachers*

Five states interviewed—*Alabama, Alaska, Idaho, North Carolina* and *New Jersey*—reported using testing of new and veteran special education teachers as one of their strategies for meeting HQT requirements. Several interviewees described testing requirements as a way of aligning special education teacher licensure requirements with those for general education teachers (i.e., no longer requiring less of special education teachers in terms of content knowledge). A number also noted that testing requirements were implemented as a direct response to NCLB/IDEA. According to one interviewee, the passage of these laws served as a “catalyst” for change.

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<sup>3</sup> Project Forum wishes to acknowledge the following individuals for taking part in an interview and reviewing an earlier version of this document: Mabrey Whetstone, State Director of Special Education, Jane Meyer, Director of Teacher Education and Certification, and Catherine Moore, Administrator, NCLB Research and Development, Alabama State Department of Education; Art Arnold, State Director of Special Education, and Cynthia Curran, Administrator, Teacher Education and Certification, Alaska Department of Education; Russ Hammond, former Coordinator of Personnel Development, and Larry Norton, Coordinator, Certification/Professional Standards Commission, Idaho Department of Education; Victoria Duff, Teacher Quality Coordinator, Eileen Aviss-Spedding, Manager of Professional Studies, and Linda Morse, Acting Director of the Office of Academic and Professional Standards, New Jersey Department of Education; Mary Lane, Consultant, Bureau of Special Education, and Anne Davis, Title II Coordinator, New Hampshire Department of Education; and Kathy Sullivan, Director of Human Resource Management, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Not all states require special education teachers to pass the same tests. For example: *Idaho* only requires special education teachers to pass special education PRAXIS exams. *Alaska, Alabama* and *New Jersey*, on the other hand, require their special education teachers to pass most of the same tests required of general education teachers. For example, elementary-level special educators teaching core academic content may be required to pass the elementary PRAXIS II; high school-level special education teachers who are teaching core academic content to students working toward *alternate* achievement standards may also be required to pass the elementary PRAXIS II; and high school-level special educators teaching core academic content may be required to pass the PRAXIS II in all appropriate content areas.

Significantly, interviewees from *Alabama* noted that the state does not require content knowledge tests for special education teachers who serve exclusively in a consultative capacity to general education teachers. In the words of one interviewee, “We’re continuing to try and hold the line that we want our students with disabilities to be taught by highly qualified general education teachers in core content areas and special education to be what it was designed to be: supplemental support to the general education program.” Interviewees report that this strategy has reduced the number of special education teachers who need to meet the HQT requirements.

*North Carolina* and *Alabama* reported that special education teachers can add academic content areas (e.g., math, science, history) to their certificates by passing the appropriate PRAXIS II exams and *North Carolina* also permits general education teachers to add special education to their certificates by passing the special education PRAXIS II exam.

### *Changes to Preservice Programs*

Three states described restructuring of personnel preparation programs at institutions of higher education (IHEs) as a way of ensuring new special education teachers are better prepared to meet the requirements of HQT. *Alabama* had the most comprehensive restructuring efforts of any of the states interviewed. To prepare teachers to teach in collaborative teaching environments (a model being adopted throughout the state), 12 of *Alabama’s* 16 teacher preparation programs are implementing plans for special and general education faculty to collaborate in the preparation of new general and special education teachers. IHEs will emphasize the development of collaborative teaching skills by *all* new teachers and will include training for general education teachers in instructional strategies for diverse learners as well as training for special education teachers in core content areas. Faculty will team teach methods courses in core content areas and, ultimately, practicum experiences for all teacher candidates will include opportunities for collaborative teaching. *Alabama’s* state education agency (SEA) offers \$18,000 grants to cooperating IHEs to facilitate communication and development of plans for restructuring. The SEA also facilitates a task force made up of IHE representatives that meets regularly to discuss efforts to better link special and general education teacher preparation programs. Other examples of restructuring include *New Jersey*, where all IHEs underwent a complete restructuring of both general and special education programs in order to align with the state’s new professional standards for teaching. Although there is no formal state-wide restructuring of IHE programs going on in *Idaho*, the interviewee reported that several IHEs are

now requiring special education teacher candidates to complete more content-based coursework, particularly in the areas of reading and literacy.

Five of the states interviewed described the development of alternative routes to certification as one strategy for increasing the numbers of highly qualified special education teachers. For example, in *Alaska* and *North Carolina*, individuals can begin work as special education teachers prior to completing formal training, and in *Idaho* individuals can pass a test and receive special education teacher certification.<sup>4</sup>

Most states also described collaborative relationships between the SEA and IHEs that indirectly help IHEs prepare special education teachers to meet HQT requirements. For example, *Alabama's* department of special education initiates three meetings per year that bring together SEA staff and representatives from the 16 IHEs with special education teacher preparation programs. The SEA requires special education representatives from the IHEs to bring their general education counterparts—thereby facilitating opportunities for cross-disciplinary dialogue. Shortly after revising their program standards in 2001, *Idaho's* department of special education used its State Improvement Grant (SIG)<sup>5</sup> funds to help IHEs cover the costs of realigning curriculum with the new standards. Both *Idaho* and *Alaska* have offered stipend money to students attending one or more IHEs throughout the state in order to offset the tuition costs of preparing to become special education teachers and *New Jersey* has provided grant money to IHEs to assist them in enhancing their special education programs. Specifically, in order to support IHEs in meeting the new certification requirements, *New Jersey* provided funds to assist with the redesign of special education teacher preparation programs and to better prepare general and special education teachers to educate students with disabilities in inclusive environments.

### *Changes to Teacher Licensure and/or Program Approval Standards*

Interviewees from three states described recent and/or planned changes to teacher licensure standards as one of the ways they are addressing requirements for HQT. For example, *Alaska* recently implemented a three-tiered system of licensure for special and general education teachers with initial, professional and master level licenses now available. In *New Jersey*, promotion from a provisional teacher to a standard certified teacher is now the primary responsibility of the LEA that assesses novice teachers' progress in meeting the state's teacher licensure requirements. Revisions to *New Hampshire's* special and general education teacher standards are also currently in draft form.

Three states also described recent and/or proposed changes to program approval standards for special and/or general education programs. For example, *Alabama* recently incorporated Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) *Model Standards for Licensing General and Special Education Teachers of Students with Disabilities* and Council for

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<sup>4</sup> Individuals in *Alaska* must already possess a valid teaching certificate in order to participate in this program and must complete all special education coursework within three years.

<sup>5</sup> SIGs are funded with IDEA Part D monies.

Exceptional Children (CEC) recommendations into its state program standards for *all* new teachers. These changes will have an impact on between six to eight courses, including practicum experiences for students in both general and special education teacher preparation programs. According to one interviewee from the state, these changes were inspired by NCLB as well as the SEA's "desire ... to redesign our way of providing services [as] a much more inclusive model."

#### *Changes to Service Delivery Patterns*

Two states described changes to service delivery patterns in public schools as a major strategy for meeting the requirements of HQT. *Alabama* described state-wide efforts to adopt a collaborative teaching model. Interviewees from *Alabama* reported that in addition to encouraging collaborative teaching, the state is working to increase the number of students with disabilities being served in general education classrooms. The chronic shortage of special education teachers in the state, however, continues to pose a challenge to the wholesale adoption of a collaborative teaching model. For more than a decade, *New Jersey*, on the other hand, has included collaborative teaching in its continuum of special education programs and services. Most recently, the *New Jersey* special education regulations differentiated the role of a support teacher from the role of a teacher aide. This distinction was made in order to enhance options for supporting students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

#### *Changes to Inservice*

Three states reported that changes to inservice provided by the SEA are intended to address HQT requirements. For example, *New Hampshire* sponsors the Content Enhancement Instructional Leadership (CEIL) project, funded by NCLB Title II-A funds, to help teachers meet HQT requirements in core content areas. Consultants in each content area provide technical assistance to *all* teachers—both general and special education. *New Hampshire's* SEA is also sponsoring a workshop for local special education directors on meeting the requirements of NCLB and sessions will focus on collaborative teaching as well as information on the conditions under which special education teachers will or will not need to meet the requirements for HQT. *New Jersey* sponsors training programs throughout the state that support collaborative teaching and the state's Professional Teaching Standards Board is developing a toolkit on this topic. The state recently proposed changes to its regulations that would require all schools to have professional development plans based on team-based learning. *Alabama's* SEA has sponsored extensive training activities (e.g., bringing in national experts to lead trainings, hosting state-wide conferences) that promote a collaborative teaching model. The state also purchased study guides for all of the PRAXIS II tests and placed them at each of *Alabama's* IHEs.

Three states also described changes to inservice provided by local education agencies (LEAs) and/or IHEs intended to address HQT requirements. For example, both *Alaska* and *Alabama* noted that many LEAs purchase materials to help teachers prepare for PRAXIS II tests. *North Carolina* reported that a number of LEAs offer workshops to help teachers prepare for state tests

(including workshops on inclusion and collaboration) and *Alabama* reported that many of its IHEs are offering study sessions for state tests.

### *Other*

States also described additional strategies for preparing special education teachers. For example three states—*Alaska*, *New Hampshire* and *New Jersey*—offer some type of mentoring of new special education teachers. *New Jersey* has required for some time that new *general education* teachers receive mentoring and in 2006 added the requirement that new *special education* teachers also receive mentoring. The SEA is in the process of preparing training materials for special education mentors.

All six states interviewed reported that veteran special education teachers can become highly qualified by using some type of HOUSSE. Some states have developed a HOUSSE specifically for special education teachers and others have a single HOUSSE for *all* teachers. For example, *New Jersey* has a generic HOUSSE, whereas *Alaska* developed a multiple-subject HOUSSE for special educators. *North Carolina* also has a HOUSSE specifically designed for special educators and has trained local school systems to implement it and “encouraged LEAs to use HOUSSE to get as many people highly qualified as appropriate.” *New Hampshire* reported that its CEIL project helps teachers—both general and special educators—complete HOUSSE requirements.

Three states described state-level efforts to help LEAs recruit qualified teachers. For the past few years, *Alabama* has used its SIG to purchase access for districts to Teachers-Teachers.com, a teacher recruitment website. However, the state will soon replace this with a single online application for teachers that will be accessible electronically to all LEAs statewide. *New Jersey* has developed several recruitment tools, including websites designed to help LEAs recruit both general and special educators and a comprehensive statewide recruitment website.<sup>6</sup> *New Jersey* also supports the Troops to Teachers program. *North Carolina* uses special education funds to pay for subscriptions to Teachers-Teachers.com for each of its 115 LEAs.

Interviewees from *New Jersey* also described a statewide taskforce organized by the Personnel Center, four subgroups of which are currently discussing how to address state needs relating to preservice, mentoring and induction, recruitment and inservice. The taskforce will develop a comprehensive plan based on these discussions.

All six states interviewed reported that the strategies they are using to meet the requirements for HQT are also being used to prepare low-incidence special education teachers.

## **Fiscal and Human Resources**

Funding for strategies used to prepare special education teachers (and in some cases *all* teachers) to meet HQT requirements has come from diverse sources, including special education money

<sup>6</sup> For more information, go to [www.njhire.com](http://www.njhire.com).

(e.g., IDEA discretionary funds, SIGs and the Personnel Center) as well as general education money (e.g., Teacher Quality Enhancement grants, NCLB Title II-A money and NCLB consolidated funds).

Interviewees from all six states reported having at least one state-level staff person dedicated part- or full-time to handling issues related to HQT, although none reported having a staff person who worked exclusively on issues relating to HQT and special education. *New Jersey*, however, supports a staff person to handle all questions relating to HQT and estimates that at least 50% of the calls to this person pertain specifically to special education.

### **Data Collection**

Most interviewees reported that data pertaining to HQT, including special education teachers, is collected at the LEA level and sent annually to the SEA. *North Carolina* is an exception to this, with data on HQT being collected at the state level, including information on how each teacher became highly qualified (e.g., via tests or HOUSSE) and in which areas he/she is highly qualified. A separate data system tracks information provided by LEAs regarding which teachers are teaching which students. The two state systems can be interfaced to provide information on whether or not specific students are being taught by highly qualified special education teachers.

In addition to keeping track of HQT via a state-level database, *New Jersey* is planning a comprehensive data collection system that will enable LEAs to report why teachers have not yet met the requirements for HQT and in which content areas they are facing particular challenges (e.g., special education, math, science). The data will serve as the basis for an extended survey that will ask about the specific strategies schools and LEAs will use to move teachers to highly qualified status (e.g., providing training for the PRAXIS II and/or access to college courses). Responses to this survey will provide baseline data that will then be used by the SEA to plan targeted assistance to LEAs.

### **Barriers to Meeting HQT Requirements**

Barriers identified by interviewees included challenges relating to the chronic lack of special education teachers, the collection and management of data relating to special education personnel, the capacity of IHE programs to align with restructured state licensure systems, and lack of training at the LEA level relating to changes in service delivery patterns (e.g., collaborative teaching and the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms).

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

NASDSE's Personnel Center and CCSSO's Center for Improving Teacher Quality generated a set of joint policy recommendations to help states adopt more comprehensive, systems-wide approaches to meeting HQT requirements for special educators that are germane to the present study because they address implementation barriers similar to those identified by interviewees.

## **Development of Comprehensive Data Planning and Management Systems**

- Align personnel data from state-certification, human resources, personnel preparation and HQT.
- Create new relationships with groups representing higher education to capture preparation program candidate data.
- Develop an infrastructure that facilitates a study of the reasons for retention/attrition of special education teachers so that these can be addressed at both the SEA and LEA levels.

## **Alignment of State Licensure, Teacher Preparation Programs and SEA/LEA Needs**

- Revise special education licensure and program approval standards to include academic content knowledge and foster collaborative skills of new and veteran teachers.
- Share course offerings to support the capacity of low-incidence preparation programs.
- Create and support partnerships between preparation programs and local community colleges to develop customized offerings for paraprofessional-to-teacher programs.
- Create collaborative networks of IHEs, community colleges and LEAs to address local special education personnel needs.
- Convene an IHE preparation program council that creates common distance learning coursework and offers non-traditional course scheduling to meet the needs of in-state candidates.
- Implement statewide distance education coursework.

## **Recruitment Processes**

- Develop state-sponsored, community-based recruitment campaigns in targeted locales.
- Partner with Teacher Cadet Programs in area high schools to help recruit for personnel preparation programs in the state.
- Use online resources to connect teacher candidates with LEA employment opportunities (e.g., state-sponsored recruiting websites or national recruiting websites customized for individual states).
- Streamline application and interview processes.

## **Addressing Retention via Changes to Service Delivery Models and Teacher Supports**

- Incorporate collaboration skills into preparation and ongoing professional development in order to align with changes to LEA service delivery models (e.g., greater inclusion and use of co-teaching).
- Conduct a statewide preparation/retention study in order to identify strategies that work.
- Develop and respond to an online working conditions study.
- Facilitate partnerships with preparation programs and LEAs to improve mentoring and induction programs.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

By introducing the concept of HQT, NCLB and IDEA have created new expectations regarding the qualifications of special education teachers. Based on the six states interviewed, it is clear that states are addressing these expectations with varying degrees of comprehensiveness. According to the Personnel Center and CTQ, states are beginning to respond to the HQT requirements in meaningful ways—for example, implementing one or more components of their strategic plans. However, the alignment of teacher preparation, licensure and ongoing professional development pose significant challenges for states, as does the development of data management systems and partnerships between the SEA, LEAs and teacher preparation programs to better align these programs.

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