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HOUSSE: State Approaches to Supporting Special Educators to Become “Highly Qualified”

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Overview

This document provides an overview of how states are utilizing the option of a High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE) to assist veteran teachers, particularly those teaching students with disabilities, to meet the “highly qualified” provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) while continuing to teach in their current placements. Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) conducted this analysis as part of its cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

Background

All students deserve access to highly qualified and effective teachers. In order to assure this, states have developed or adopted high teacher standards requiring qualifications specific to the field in which they teach. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) requires that any veteran special education teacher (generally a teacher with one or more years of experience) who teaches core academic subjects (i.e., English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, art, or history and geography) must, by the end of the 2005-2006 school year, do one of the following:

- pass a rigorous state academic test in the subjects taught;
- complete an undergraduate academic major in subjects taught;
- complete a graduate degree in subjects taught;
- complete coursework equivalent to an undergraduate academic major, advanced certification or credentialing; or
- complete a HOUSSE.

According to IDEA, for a special education teacher, the term “highly qualified” has the same meaning given in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), except that “the teacher has obtained full State certification as a special education teacher (including certification obtained through alternative routes to certification), or passed the State special education teacher licensing examination, and holds a license to teach in the State as a special education teacher. . . .” [20 USC 1401 §602(10)(B)(i)]

HOUSSE is a system under NCLB and IDEA through which veteran teachers at all grade levels can demonstrate subject-matter knowledge without necessarily completing further formalized training or taking a test. Under NCLB, a state’s HOUSSE must “be aligned with challenging state academic content and student academic achievement standards” and provide “objective, coherent information about the teacher’s attainment of core content knowledge in the academic subjects in which a teacher teaches.” [34 CFR §200.23(C)(ii)]

States have been given latitude to create a HOUSSE to assess teachers’ content knowledge that is unique to state licensure standards. While allowing flexibility, HOUSSE plans require rigor to ensure that teachers demonstrate subject-matter competency while creating or maintaining fair content standards for all teachers, whether novice or veteran. According to NCLB, teachers must meet a set of standards for subject-matter knowledge that is based on the following criteria:

- grade-appropriate subject-matter knowledge and teaching skills;
- alignment with state student academic and achievement standards;
- objective, coherent information on teachers’ subject matter competency;
- uniform application;
- consideration of, but not be based primarily on, the time a teacher has been teaching a subject;
- available to the public; and
- multiple, objective measures of teacher competency.

Some special education teachers at the middle and secondary level teach several subjects to the same or various groups of students. A state’s HOUSSE must provide documentation for each content area teaching assignment to satisfy the definition of a highly qualified teacher. This has led to differentiation in state HOUSSE plans and the options/criteria they have identified for veteran teachers to demonstrate content preparation/expertise in each core academic subject they teach. Therefore, utilizing the HOUSSE process for each subject could become unnecessarily prolonged and repetitive for multi-subject teachers.

Subject-specific HOUSSE refers to an area of flexibility of NCLB that permits states to allow veteran teachers to demonstrate subject matter competency differently than new teachers, who must have the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree, advanced degree or advanced certificate in the subject they teach or have taken a rigorous test. Subject-specific HOUSSE permits states to recognize teachers’ experience, expertise, professional training gathered over time and teacher performance among other things to demonstrate subject mastery in one content area (Paige, 2004).

Multi-subject HOUSSE refers to further flexibility of the HOUSSE for all experienced middle and secondary teachers of multiple core academic subjects. With this flexibility, states may streamline their procedures by developing a process for these teachers to demonstrate subject matter mastery in each of the subjects they teach through a single set of procedures. Teachers are expected to meet the same high standards for each subject that they teach through this one process rather than separate evaluation processes for each subject (Paige, 2004).

According to the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) August 2005 non-regulatory guidance¹, the NCLB teacher qualification requirements apply to special education teachers who provide direct instruction in core academic subjects. These teachers may demonstrate subject matter competency by using any of the options allowed for other teachers under NCLB. Special educators who do not directly instruct students in core academic subjects or who provide only consultation to highly qualified teachers in adapting curricula (e.g., using behavioral supports and interventions or selecting appropriate accommodations) do not need to demonstrate subject-matter competency.

HOUSSE Components Used To Document Competence

Many states have developed a HOUSSE for their veteran teachers. HOUSSE components usually fall into several general categories:

- *Point System or Rubric*: A veteran teacher accumulates points for various professional activities, usually relating to the subject taught. Frequently used categories include coursework; professional development; services to the profession; student achievement data; and awards, recognition or publications.
- *Performance Evaluation*: In most cases, an already existing performance evaluation system is used. It may include observation and review by peers, a panel or a supervisor, or by the teacher him/herself. Content knowledge is usually one criterion among others such as classroom management and instructional skills.
- *Portfolio*: A collection of evidence from the teacher's practice and primarily from the classroom that demonstrates his or her competence in the subject taught. A portfolio typically contains observation/evaluation notes, student work and classroom artifacts.
- *Professional Development*: A teacher can meet competency by participating in a certain amount of professional development in the subject taught. Often teachers will determine what is needed to meet competency and submit those requirements in a plan to be completed by the end of the 2006 school year.
- *Classroom Experience*: Successful teaching experience related to the subject may be considered toward meeting requirements for HOUSSE. This could include collaborative teaching with a "highly qualified" core content area general educator, teaching core content subjects aligned to the state standards in self contained special education classes or teaching university courses or workshops on the content area.

¹ This guidance is available at: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/teacherqual/guidance.doc>

- *Student Achievement Data*: This category measures the teacher's effect on student achievement or learning through students' scores on assessments.
- *College Coursework in Content Area*: This category includes advanced degrees or undergraduate work in the content area in which the teacher seeks to become highly qualified.
- *Activities or Services in the Content Area*: Activities and services might include serving as the lead or mentor teacher or running an after-school program in the content area.
- *Awards*: Awards could include teacher of the year, program association awards or others.
- *Utilizing Rural Flexibility*: Through non-regulatory policy, ED allows small schools in rural districts to have additional time for multiple-subject teachers who are highly qualified in one subject to become highly qualified in additional subjects (Paige, 2004).

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in two phases. First, Project Forum, in conjunction with the Center for Teacher Quality (CTQ), developed a survey instrument requesting information on each state education agency's (SEA) subject-specific HOUSSE and/or multi-subject HOUSSE. As part of the survey, SEAs were requested to provide a web link to their HOUSSE documents. By October 31, 2005, Project Forum had received responses from 43 SEAs (including 40 states and 3 non-state jurisdictions). Data were then verified and more detailed information gathered by checking the web links provided by respondents.

Survey Results

Survey results are reported in two separate sections: one for subject-specific HOUSSE and one for multi-subject HOUSSE.

Subject-Specific HOUSSE

Thirty-seven SEAs reported that they have developed a *subject-specific* HOUSSE for all experienced teachers to demonstrate subject-matter competency. Of these, two SEAs noted that their subject-specific HOUSSE plans apply only to middle and high school teachers, although one reported that its would soon apply also to elementary school teachers. Of the six SEAs that reported having no subject-specific HOUSSE, two reported that their HOUSSE plans combine elements of both subject-specific and multi-subject HOUSSE plans and one of these explained that it had adopted its state licensure system as its HOUSSE. A third noted that development of a HOUSSE would require coordination with general education certification, which is not addressing the issue at this time due to staff vacancies.

Components of a Subject-Specific HOUSSE

Thirty SEAs provided information relating to the components of their subject-specific HOUSSE plans. Most commonly, components include:

- classroom experience (23 SEAs);
- point system or rubric (22 SEAs);
- professional development (22 SEAs); and
- knowledge in content area (13 SEAs).

Other components identified less frequently include:

- college coursework in content area (8 SEAs);
- performance evaluations (7 SEAs);
- activities or service relating to content area (e.g., presentations or participation in professional conferences) (7 SEAs);
- awards (7 SEAs);
- student achievement data (6 SEAs);
- portfolios (5 SEAs); and
- advanced degrees in content area (4 SEAs).

Components identified by no more than two SEAs include passing a national teacher exam; completing a nationally recognized certification program; utilizing rural flexibility; serving as a lead or mentor teacher; passing a technology literacy exam; conducting a self-assessment; being observed by members of an evaluation panel; developing curriculum; publishing in professional journals; being a member of content specific professional organizations; and teaching at an institution of higher education (IHE).

Subject-Specific HOUSSE for Special Education Teachers

Of the 37 SEAs that reported having a subject-specific HOUSSE for all experienced teachers, 32 reported that their subject-specific HOUSSE also applies to special education teachers. Of the five remaining SEAs, four reported that they have already developed or are planning to develop a HOUSSE that will apply *only* to special education teachers.

All four of these SEAs provided information on the components of their subject-specific HOUSSE for special educators. Components include or will include:

- classroom experience (4 SEAs);
- professional development (3 SEAs);
- knowledge in content area (2 SEAs);
- college coursework (1 SEA);
- performance evaluation (1 SEA); and
- student achievement data (1 SEA).

Of the four SEAs, one reported that its subject-specific HOUSSE for special education teachers is already available and two others reported that the subject-specific HOUSSE would be available in October 2005.

Multi-Subject HOUSSE

States were less likely to have developed a *multi-subject* HOUSSE for all experienced teachers. Only 20 SEAs reported having developed a multi-subject HOUSSE. Of these, one SEA noted that its HOUSSE applies only to elementary education teachers.² Twenty-one SEAs reported that they have not developed a multi-subject HOUSSE.

Components of a Multi-Subject HOUSSE

Of the 20 SEAs that have developed a multi-subject HOUSSE, 12 provided information regarding the components of their HOUSSE. Most commonly, multi-subject HOUSSE plans include:

- professional development (10 SEAs);
- classroom experience (9 SEAs);
- point or rubric system (8 SEAs);
- performance evaluation (4 SEAs);
- knowledge in content area (4 SEAs);
- awards (4 SEAs);
- activities and service relating to content area (e.g., presentations or professional conferences) (4 SEAs); and
- student achievement data (3 SEAs).

Components mentioned by no more than two SEAs include completing an advanced degree in a content area; completing a nationally recognized certification program; utilizing rural flexibility; being observed by members of an evaluation panel; developing curriculum; being a member in content specific professional organizations; publishing in professional journals; and teaching at an IHE.

Multi-Subject HOUSSE for Special Education Teachers

Of the 20 SEAs reporting that they do have a multi-subject HOUSSE for all teachers, 17 report that it also applies to special education teachers. Two of the three remaining SEAs report that they offer a *separate* multi-subject HOUSSE for special education teachers and the third reports that it will soon do so.

Furthermore, of the 21 SEAs that have not developed a multi-subject HOUSSE for all teachers, seven reported that they have either developed or are planning to develop a multi-subject HOUSSE that is *only* for special education teachers.

² According to the definition of a HOUSSE, an elementary teacher would only need to use the HOUSSE process in the event that he or she preferred to not take the approved test for elementary teachers or did not pass the test.

Seven of the 10 SEAs offering or planning to offer a multi-subject HOUSSE exclusively for special education teachers provided information on the components of their HOUSSE plans. These include or will include:

- professional development (6 SEAs);
- classroom experience (6 SEAs);
- point or rubric system (5 SEAs);
- knowledge in the content area (4 SEAs);
- performance evaluation (3 SEAs);
- student achievement data (3 SEAs);
- portfolio (1 SEA); and
- utilizing rural flexibility (1 SEA).

One of the 10 SEAs planning to offer a multi-subject HOUSSE for special educators noted that components have not yet been identified.

Four of the 10 SEAs noted that their multi-subject HOUSSE for special education teachers is already available; two others reported that they will be available in Fall of 2005; and two remaining SEAs reported that they will be available in Fall of 2006.³

Concluding Remarks

Clearly, the intent of IDEA and NCLB is to ensure that teachers have expertise in the subjects they teach. The NCLB requirement that all teachers be highly qualified is designed to eliminate out-of-field teaching by the end of the 2005-06 school year.

Many states have chosen to utilize subject-specific and/or multi-subject HOUSSE options as an appropriate way to judge the breadth and depth of a teacher's knowledge. They have displayed remarkable flexibility towards identifying objective evidence of a veteran teacher's subject-matter knowledge as part of their HOUSSE plans. Some states are using the HOUSSE option to ensure that all teachers have at least a minor in their field(s), as evidenced by credit/coursework requirements. Others are utilizing points earned for specified types of activities that are relevant to the teachers' subject-matter knowledge to indicate competency.

Currently, a debate is brewing regarding the implementation of the flexible HOUSSE option to the highly qualified teacher provision of NCLB. IDEA 2004 has made it clear that HOUSSE standards are permitted for special educators to meet the *same* standards for content knowledge requirements as general education teachers, both veteran and new to the field. However some, including the Education Trust, a nonprofit organization that advocates for poor and minority children, believe that in its efforts to achieve the goal of having a highly qualified teacher in every classroom, IDEA has allowed states to "lower the bar." The Education Commission of the States, a national clearinghouse of education data and research, criticizes the fact that states

³ These numbers sum to nine rather than 10 because one state did not provide information on when its multi-subject HOUSSE would be available.

allow nearly all veteran special education teachers to be considered highly qualified (Kravetz, 2005).

According to LRP Publications (Kravetz, 2005), comments sent to the Department of Education encourage the federal government to give states the power to develop their HOUSSE to fit their own needs. Evidence that states are focused on balancing the highly qualified provisions comes from work generated by CTQ at the Council of Chief State School Officers. Through CTQ, a cross-state community of practice investigated HOUSSE systems and ideas to meet the highly qualified teacher requirements. The product of this collective work encourages three major considerations in the development of a HOUSSE procedure:

- rigor, including objective, substantive evidence appropriate to judge the breadth and depth of teachers' knowledge;
- flexibility through a practical array of activities that have direct relevance to subject-matter knowledge; and
- responsiveness to current and emerging patterns of service delivery in both general and special education.

Concerns that teachers will not be able to satisfy the challenging requirements by the June 2006 deadline⁴ -- and leave an ever-widening gap between the number of qualified special educators necessary to staff the nation's diverse classrooms and the number produced and retained -- continue to plague state and local departments of education. These issues force administrators to identify the fine line between implementing the highest reasonable standards and lowering the standards so a few veteran teachers can stay in the classroom and be supported to improve their performance.

⁴ According to the October 21, 2005 policy letter from Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, states that fall short of the highly qualified teacher goal, but meet the implementation requirements, will be asked to submit a revised plan for reaching the goal in the 2006-07 school year.

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