Highly Qualified Teacher Requirements for Special Educators: Perceptions of West Virginia Stakeholders

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Abstract

Federal law mandates that all teachers, including special educators, must be highly qualified by meeting standards for licensure in the academic content areas they teach. This provision has an impact on prospective and practicing teachers, on schools and school systems, and on colleges and universities, especially those in rural areas. This study surveyed special education teachers, school administrators, and faculty members in a rural state to identify their perspectives on the benefits and drawbacks of the highly qualified teacher requirement and its effect on the field of special education. The results reveal that stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of the highly qualified teacher requirements are positive as well as negative and reflect both their respective roles in special education and the rural contexts in which they work.

In 2001, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, making major changes in federal education policy, including adding a provision that all teachers must be “highly qualified.” The intention of the highly qualified requirement in NCLB is to hold expectations that teachers are better prepared for the task of promoting academic achievement by all students (Safier, 2007). One facet of this requirement is that all teachers must hold a baccalaureate degree and a teaching license, including qualifications in the academic content areas they are assigned to teach (Reese, 2004). NCLB mandated that by the end of 2006, all teachers must be “highly qualified,” a deadline that was later extended to the end of the 2007 school year (Henig, 2006).

The implications of the highly qualified requirement in NCLB and its effects on education have been widely discussed (Safier, 2007). In 1999-2000, the academic year just prior to the enactment of NCLB, 99% of public school teachers had at least a baccalaureate degree and some graduate training, and nearly 92% had regular teaching certificates. Even though most teachers held professional teaching certificates, approximately 20% taught some courses outside of their field of expertise (Ingersoll, 2003). These teachers would not be considered highly qualified under NCLB.

Districts have struggled to find highly qualified teachers, sometimes making difficult decisions. Some school districts will hire a teacher for a position out of convenience rather than competence because the process of finding a qualified teacher can take time and money that the district cannot afford (Ingersoll, 2005). Decisions made under pressure to fill a teaching position can be detrimental to the achievement of students and ultimately mislead parents as to the quality of instruction their child is receiving. Some principals feel pressured to hire teachers who are highly qualified rather than teachers who fit the school or job better. School administrators believe that veteran teachers faced with the need to meet additional requirements to become highly qualified are leaving teaching positions (Roelke & King Rice, 2008).

In the United States, 32.3% of schools are designated as rural. These schools educate 9,039,731 students (19.5% of the nation’s students). Fourteen percent of rural education students qualify for special education services (Rural School and Community Trust, 2009). Rural schools have found it particularly difficult to attract and retain teachers, leaving the areas with fewer well qualified and fully certified personnel as compared to their urban counterparts (Monk, 2007). Rural schools face the challenges of low teacher pay and few professional development opportunities when hiring highly qualified teachers (USGAO, 2004).

Teacher recruitment and retention are also problematic issues in the field of special education.
Nationally, the shortage of fully certified special education teachers has increased from 7.4% in 1993-1994 to 12.2% in 2001-2002, while the number of additionally needed special education teachers increased from 25,000 to 49,000 in the same time period (Boe & Cook, 2006). Schools are forced to hire many special educators on emergency permits and support them in obtaining training to acquire professional licensure (Skrtic, 2005). In addition, preparation of special educators traditionally has not focused on the acquisition of knowledge of academic content or methods for teaching academic content. Now that special education teachers are required by NCLB to have academic content knowledge in order to achieve highly qualified status, those who are already teaching must pass a standardized teacher competency exam or complete specific professional development activities in the content areas they teach (King-Sears, 2005). It is difficult to predict what impact the highly qualified teacher requirements may have on recruiting prospective special educators.

Studies have shown that 13.2% of special educators will leave their positions per year, 6% will completely leave the field of education, and 7% will transfer into the general education classroom. In the first 3 years of teaching special education, 29% of teachers are predicted to leave the field, a number that continues to increase, resulting in 39% of teachers leaving by the end of their 5th year (Billingsley, 2004). Stressful workplace conditions and inadequate compensation play major roles in the attrition rate. Workloads for special education teachers have increased by 22% in the last 4 years (Carlson, 2001), increasing the likelihood of teachers leaving the classroom overcome by large caseloads, excessive paperwork, and frequent meetings (Skrtic, 2005). In addition, today's special educators are required to play a greater role in teaching more advanced academic content to students with special needs, a task for which many veteran teachers were not well prepared. The Schools and Staffing Survey for beginning teachers indicated that general and special education teachers who had only limited preparation or no preparation were not as successful as those who had extensive preparation in both content (i.e., classes in a variety of subject areas) and pedagogy (i.e., teaching methods; Boe, Shin, & Cook, 2007). The extent to which these increased demands may have worsened the attrition rate is as yet unknown. Furthermore, nationally, the number of special education teachers needed is expected to increase by 17% percent from 2008 to 2018; faster than the average for all occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

The prospect of recruiting and retaining highly qualified special educators in rural settings seems especially dim. The known shortages of educators in rural areas and special educators in general, combined with the issues that NCLB raises in rural education (e.g., ensuring educators are highly qualified in areas with limited recruitment pools) raises questions about the current legislation as it applies to rural special education (Kossar, Mitchem, & Ludlow, 2005). Leaders in special education are of mixed opinions about the appropriateness of the policies as illustrated by the multiple viewpoints on the topic and its implications for rural special education presented in the Fall 2005 topical issue of Rural Special Education Quarterly (Ludlow, 2005). The critical challenges in special education and the unique contexts of rural education, there is a need to study what impact NCLB has on the persistent critical teacher shortages and high attrition rates that have characterized special education in rural schools. There has been little research in the discipline of special education examining the views of the individuals most directly affected by the mandates of this law. One national study (Kossar et al., 2005; Mitchem, Kossar & Ludlow, 2006) solicited the perceptions of teacher educators, teachers, administrators, parents, and policy makers about NCLB requirements for adequate yearly progress and highly qualified teachers. Respondents expressed many concerns about possible negative implications for recruitment and retention of special educators in rural schools. Many felt that a special education teacher should be considered highly qualified solely on the basis of certification in special education.

This study was designed to investigate the impact of the implementation of the highly qualified teacher requirement on special education in the rural state of West Virginia. The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions held by various stakeholders (faculty, administrators, teachers) in special education service delivery and personnel preparation about the nature and impact of highly qualified teacher requirements for special education teachers. The goal was to collect data to be shared with leaders in the field of special education as well as policy makers at the national level to inform discussion related to reauthorization of NCLB and IDEA. The primary research questions were:

1. What are faculty perceptions in West Virginia of teachers with "highly qualified" status?
2. What are administrators' perceptions in West Virginia of teachers with "highly qualified" status?
3. What are teachers' perceptions in West Virginia of "highly qualified" status?
4. What are faculty, administrators', and teachers' perceptions in West Virginia of the question, "Are teachers with "highly qualified" status better prepared and more skillful than those who are not?"
Method

Rural Context

The U.S. Office of Management and Budget reported that West Virginia had 21 counties (38%) with metropolitan areas (population 50,000 or over) primarily urban and suburban, 8 counties (15%) with metropolitan areas (population 10,000-49,000) mixed urban, suburban and rural, and 26 counties (47%) considered non-core or predominantly rural (RUPRI, 2006). The 2000 U.S. Census showed that West Virginia ranked second (after Vermont) among states in rural population, with 69.2% of the population residing in rural areas of fewer than 2500 people and 80.4% residing in areas with fewer than 10,000 people, as compared with the U.S. as a whole where 31.1% live in areas with fewer than 2500 people and 41.1% live in areas with fewer than 10,000 people (ERS, n.d.). In 2007, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (ERS) reported that West Virginia lost only 2.1% of its rural population between 2000 and 2006. Also, in 2009, the Rural School and Community Trust reported that West Virginia ranked in the top 15 states with respect to the number of rural schools, with 51.4% of schools located in rural areas.

The West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS) provides publicly available reports on the state’s schools and teachers as required under NCLB (WVEIS, n.d.). In 2007-2008, West Virginia reported serving 281,735 students in the state’s 708 public schools, including 47,855 (16.99%) students with disabilities; these schools ranged in size from one student to over 2,300 students, with 234 elementary schools (58.5%) classified as small schools (enrollment under 300) and 62 middle schools (39.7%) and 45 high schools (37.3%) classified as small schools (enrollment under 500). In 2005-2006, the most recent year for which data are available, West Virginia reported that 91.6% of academic content classes were taught by highly qualified teachers, while the percentage of such classes taught by teachers who did not have highly qualified status was higher in the primarily rural, high poverty schools (8.96%) than in low poverty schools (8.87%).

The West Virginia Department of Education’s Personnel Center provides data on the number and characteristics of teachers prepared for and employed by the state’s schools (WVDE, n.d.). In 2007-2008, the state listed 13 of the state’s 20 approved teacher education programs as offering a program leading to certification in one or more areas of special education in conjunction with general education, with 4 of the 13 institutions also offering alternative routes to certification in special education at the post-baccalaureate level. In 2006-2007, the most recent year for which data are available, West Virginia posted 671 positions for special education personnel across all specializations, with almost 60% in multicharacteristic special education (for students with high incidence disabilities); 326 (48.6%) positions were filled by fully certified special educators, 76.5 (11.4%) positions were filled by certified special educators on permit for the endorsement area (e.g., a teacher certified in learning and behavior disorders currently teaching a class for students with autism), 72 (10.7%) positions were filled by certified general educators with out-of-field authorizations (e.g., a teacher certified in elementary education teaching students with moderate/severe disabilities), 59.9 (8.9%) positions were filled by individuals on initial permit (e.g., newly certified teachers), 14.5 (2.1%) positions were filled by individuals on alternative certificates (e.g., teachers who are not certified in education but have earned another professional degree), and 123 (18.3%) positions were not filled or filled by long-term substitutes.

Sample Characteristics

The researchers sent the survey to all faculty (N = 23) working in teacher education programs in special education in all colleges and universities in West Virginia, all central office staff (N = 55) responsible for special education services in public school systems in the state, all principals (N = 539) in elementary and secondary schools in the state, and all teachers working in special education positions (N = 239) in elementary and secondary schools in the state at the beginning of the 2007-2008 academic year. Thirteen faculty respondents (56.5% of population), 22 directors of special education (41.8% of population), 79 school principals (13.3% of the population), and 184 teachers (76.9% of population) completed the online survey: in total, 299 completed surveys with a 34.9% overall response rate. Please see Table 1 for additional teacher demographics. Because the response rate for principals was so low and because visual inspection of the data revealed no major differences between the responses of the two groups, the researchers combined the principals and directors for the purposes of data analysis into a group representing the overall concerns of administrators.

Data Collection

The researchers designed an online survey with three forms for this study to elicit stakeholders’ perceptions of highly qualified status. Questions were written to reflect concepts discussed in the professional literature related to the topic of highly qualified teachers as defined by federal law. The research team generated the survey questions based upon their reading of multiple sources in the professional literature in rural education and in special education highlighting issues in the application of the highly qualified teacher
Table 1.

Teacher Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>29 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>52 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>78 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Grades</td>
<td>21 (12%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialization</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>126 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>22 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Delays</td>
<td>20 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory Impairments</td>
<td>6 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifted</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>6 (3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic Area</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>118 (65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>39 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>25 (14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Education leaders (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Wayne & Youngs, 2003) argued that highly qualified teachers must have both content knowledge and pedagogical skills developed through comprehensive preparation programs. A report prepared for the Rural School and Community Trust (Jimerson, 2003) and a study of the impact of No Child Left Behind on rural school systems by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (USGAO, 2004) both identified the problems school systems were facing in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers, especially in shortage areas such as special education. The Winter 2005 issue of Rural Special Education Quarterly (Mitchem, Salzberg, & Ludlow, 2005) featured a series of articles discussing the impact of this law on rural special education, including what effect the highly qualified teacher mandate might have on critical shortages of special education personnel. With the pending reauthorization of No Child Left Behind, a bi-partisan national group (Commission on No Child Left Behind, 2007) proposed revisions to this law that would replace the highly qualified teacher provision with a highly qualified effective teacher mandate that would evaluate teachers in part by the improvements made by their students on the standardized state content assessments. This controversial proposal has been criticized by groups such as the National Education Association (NEA, n.d.) and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, n.d.) because it fails to account for the complex and often challenging conditions under which many teachers work.

Each survey began with a brief description of the components of the highly qualified teacher requirement and asked the participants to respond to questions to share their perspectives on the impact of highly qualified teacher requirements for special educators. The first section of each survey contained five demographic information questions written in a fixed-response format. The second section of each survey contained 10 questions related to the impact of highly qualified teacher requirements, with 6 questions written in a fixed-response format using a 4-point Likert scale (i.e., strongly agree to strongly disagree), and 4 questions written in an open-ended format so participants could type in comments.

Following approval of the research by the West Virginia University Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researchers prepared the survey for online delivery using the Survey Solutions Perseus system. Researchers then obtained email addresses for teachers, principals and faculty from lists published by the West Virginia Department of Education. They sent potential participants an email message inviting them to complete the anonymous online survey. The email message contained an explanation of the study and a hyperlink to the survey form with a deadline for submitting it. The online survey began with a cover page stating the following: (a) purpose of the study, (b) information regarding consent to participate, (c) statement of...
Results and Discussion

The results of the data analysis revealed both similarities and differences in perceptions across the three groups of stakeholders: (a) faculty, (b) administrators and (c) teachers.

Demographic Information

Of the 13 faculty respondents, 70% reported that their college or university was located primarily in a rural area. Of the 184 teacher respondents, 65% reported that their school was located in a primarily rural area. The geographic location item was not working correctly on the administrator survey form; however, of the 22 district level administrators, 91% reported that they worked in a small or very small school system (fewer than 15,000 students total), and, of the 79 building level administrators, 60% reported that they worked in a small or very small school (fewer than 300 students total at the elementary level or 500 students total at the secondary level). This is consistent with the data reported above and suggests that the sample appropriately reflects the rural character of West Virginia.

Group Responses to Specific Survey Items

The researchers tallied responses for each respondent group and each question; these are reported here as percentages to allow comparisons between groups of different sizes. Where responses were mutually exclusive (Yes, No, Undecided), the percentages total 100 but, where respondents could select more than one response, percentages total more than 100.

Facility. The researchers asked teacher educators to respond to three survey questions related to personnel preparation. When asked if graduates met highly qualified requirements for area of specialization and grade level, all 13 respondents (100%) indicated that they did. In response to the question of how candidates met those requirements, 77% selected dual certification in general and special education, 69% selected additional coursework (i.e., coursework beyond that required in degree program) in academic content areas, 62% selected additional coursework in special education, and 15% selected additional coursework in general education. When asked to identify challenges in preparing highly qualified teachers, 46% noted higher credit requirements discourage candidates from selecting the special education program, 38% respondents noted full schedules, and 38% noted availability of academic content courses; only 23% noted that they did not face any challenges. These response patterns reflect current trends in personnel preparation programs for special educators in West Virginia. In fact, colleges and universities with undergraduate or 5-year programs have been asked by the state to offer dual certification programs, and all institutions that offer special education certification at the these levels offer special education in conjunction with elementary education.

Administrators. The researchers asked administrators to respond to three survey questions related to hiring practices. When asked what percentage of special educators in their school or
school system were highly qualified, of the 101 administrators responding, 40% reported 100% of teachers, 37% reported 75%-99% of teachers, 15% reported 50%-75% of teachers, and 8% reported fewer than 50% of teachers; thus, 23% of respondents reported that a significant number of special educators do not meet requirements for highly qualified teacher status. When asked to what extent highly qualified status was considered in hiring decisions, a mere 22% of respondents said they only hire individuals who are already highly qualified, while the majority (i.e., 67% of respondents) said they employ the most capable individuals and support them to become highly qualified while working and another 21% said they hire individuals and inform them they are responsible for attaining highly qualified status; only 6% said they do not consider an applicant’s highly qualified teacher status. When asked to identify challenges in hiring highly qualified teachers, 79% of these administrators noted that there were not enough teachers to meet the demand, 33% noted that other school systems paid higher salaries, 20% noted that their rural location did not attract applicants, and 12% noted limited resources; only 9% noted that they did not face any challenges.

Teachers. The researchers asked special education teachers to respond to three survey questions related to attaining highly qualified teacher status as a special educator. When asked if they met highly qualified teacher requirements themselves, of the 184 teachers responding, 69% said yes, 28% said no, and 3% (n=2) did not respond. When asked how they met these requirements, 27% of respondents selected completion of a preservice program, 20% selected completion of an alternative certification program, 12% selected satisfying HOUSSÉ provisions, while another 20% indicated they were certified in special education and were still completing highly qualified requirement, 19% said they were still completing requirements for both special education and highly qualified status, and 3% did not respond (total % = 101; the error in the calculation attributable to rounding). When asked if they believe special educators who meet highly qualified teacher requirements were more capable and effective teaching core academic content, teachers who meet those requirements were as likely to say yes (37.5%) as undecided (34%) or no (28.5%), but teachers who do not currently meet them were much more likely to say no (58%) than undecided (26%) or yes (16%). These differences reflect the realities of working in the field for these special educators in this rural state.

Group Responses to Common Survey Items

The researchers compared respondent ratings on survey questions 4, 5, 6, and 7, which were the same on all survey forms, to determine the extent to which different stakeholders held common perceptions of the impact of the highly qualified teacher mandate on special education.

When asked whether special education teachers who meet highly qualified requirements are better prepared and more skillful at teaching core academic content than teachers who do not meet those requirements, respondents differed in their perceptions. Teacher educators (n=13) were most likely to agree with that statement (84% of respondents). Administrators (n=101) were also highly likely to agree with that statement (74% of respondents). Teachers (n=184) were less likely to agree with that statement (52% of respondents).

Respondents showed a similar pattern when asked whether special education teachers who meet highly qualified requirements produce higher academic achievement for students with disabilities. Teacher educators (n=13) were most likely to agree with the statement (84%), administrators (n=101) were fairly likely to agree with the statement (67%), and teachers (n=184) were least likely to agree with the statement (47%). These differences may reflect to some extent the fact that veteran teachers believed they were effective at teaching academic content before the highly qualified standard was imposed.

In response to the statement that the mandate for highly qualified teachers has made employment of special educators more difficult, administrators (n=101) were more likely to agree (73%) than other respondents, with less than half (45%) of the teacher educators (n=13) and even fewer (38%) teachers (n=184) willing to agree.

When asked to consider whether the highly qualified teacher requirement has made special education teaching careers a less desirable option, respondents were agreed that this was a concern, although teacher educators (n=13) were more likely to agree (85%) than either administrators (n=101 or 71%) or teachers (n=184 or 62%).

These differences suggest that each group of stakeholders identifies issues related to the highly qualified teacher mandate from the perspective of its own role in the field. Administrators are most concerned about their ability to recruit special educators who meet the highly qualified standard, while teacher educators are more concerned that increased requirements for licensure may make it more difficult to attract teacher candidates into special education preparation programs. In general, teacher educators were least likely to see any negative impact of the mandate for highly qualified teachers and most likely to see a positive impact of this requirement. Special education teachers were least likely to see any positive impact of the mandate but also less likely than the other groups to see significant negative impact.
**Group Responses to Open-ended Questions**

The researchers initially used an open coding strategy to derive categories (termed “labels”) for the responses directly from the data. Once a list of labels was derived, the first and second author grouped the labels from questions #8 and #9 (because responses were similar) into five common themes: (a) policy, (b) requirements, (c) students, (d) teachers, and (e) test. Examples of responses labeled as themes are listed in Table 2. Once the themes were developed, the researchers grouped responses to questions #8 and #9 according to theme. They then compared responses by role (i.e., administrators, faculty, teachers) to identify similarities and differences across groups. The results for each question are described below.

### Table 2. Themes and Examples for Responses to Questions #8 and #9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>HQ does not necessarily mean an effective teacher; blanket statements about the policy for or against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requirements</td>
<td>should not be the same as regular education; don’t require more from special education teachers; have alternative requirements; requirements for high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>educational ability; difficult students; students not staying in the same school; student’s ability; issues at home; parents; low SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>teacher retention/attrition; shortages; number of teachers entering the field; dishonesty, cheating, teaching to the test, mistrust, low pay, positions filled with substitutes; seniority; lose best teachers; career changers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test</td>
<td>value added measures, tracking scores, not a wise basis for deciding HQ, need to improve the test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question #8: Reaction to “highly qualified effective teacher” status based on state test scores.** In response to question #8 (“Proposed changes to the No Child Left Behind Act are designed to require that all teachers achieve ‘highly qualified effective teacher’ status, with effective defined by each teacher’s ranking based on the state test scores of his/her students. What is your reaction to this proposal? What issues would you face as a teacher educator/teacher/administrator if this proposal became law?”), comments fell into the five general themes: (a) policy, (b) requirements, (c) test, (d) teachers, and (e) students.

The most responses made by each of the three groups surveyed related to the theme policy and were overwhelmingly negative across each group. Administrators replied with comments such as, “...reaction to this proposal is disbelief,” “Ridiculous idea!” “It’s another hoop to jump through that won’t really make a difference,” “...this would be a nightmare,” and “This is totally ludicrous.” Faculty responded similarly with comments like, “I am horrified,” “I do not support this aspect of the law,” “Bad idea!” Teachers responded even more harshly with comments like, “I think this is a terrible proposal...” “The No Child Left Behind Program is a boondoggle which itself should be left behind,” “That proposal is rubbish,” “I think this would be about as effective as determining ‘highly qualified doctors’ by checking their patients’ obesity rates” and “Asinine...” Issues related to the proposal included, “You would be judged by the caseload you are assigned not your effectiveness as a teacher,” “We could have teachers that are highly qualified that can not [sic] teach,” and “Personnel laws would have to change.”

A number of administrators and teachers made responses comparing the terms highly qualified and effective. The responses were all very similar to the following, made by an administrator, “A person that is considered highly qualified is not necessarily an effective teacher and sometimes the most effective are not highly qualified.”

A few respondents did make favorable comments in response to this question. Comments included, “It would certainly hold teachers accountable, which would be great!” (administrator), “I think these changes are important in improving quality across the nation,” (faculty), and “I believe this is a necessity especially in the area of special education” (teacher).
A high number of responses related to the theme students were also made. The comments suggested that, due to different factors relating to students, using student test scores to deem teachers effective would be unfair. Factors mentioned included IQ, attendance, test taking ability, reading level, disability, low SES, and parent involvement. Administrator comments included “NO consideration for the students’ abilities!” and “A student’s achievement is a combination of many factors.” Faculty members made similar comments: “It is unfair to hold teachers responsible for performance when they cannot control all these factors” and “Special education students are in special education for a reason.” Teacher comments included “Highly qualified teachers of low ability students can only achieve what their students are capable of,” “...every child comes from a multiple type of background and educational situation,” and “At the secondary level, special education teachers work with students who are frequently absent and who receive minimal support at home.”

Administrators, faculty, and teachers also responded to question #8 with comments that fit the theme teachers. Administrators indicated that determining effectiveness of a teacher based on test scores would lead to staffing issues (e.g., problems with retention, fewer individuals entering the field, difficulty hiring teachers), teachers cheating, and instruction suffering because teachers would “teach to the test.” Faculty also were concerned with teaching to the test and “...the disappearance of our best students who would be alert enough to change careers rather than be treated like slave labor for insulting pay levels.” Teachers provided similar comments to administrators and faculty, stating that special education teachers would lose jobs, there would be problems with retention and hiring, and good teachers would be lost. Specific teachers wrote “I would not go into special ed if I were starting education right now,” “If this becomes law, I would just go back into general education,” and “They certainly would lose motivation for the career they love.”

A smaller number of responses fell under the theme test. Administrators mentioned basing effectiveness on a sole test score would be unfair and that effectiveness would be better based on a value-added measure or student progress. Faculty also agreed that “student progress should not be evaluated on test scores alone.” Teachers were more critical of the way tests are designed and if they actually are testing what students with disabilities understand (e.g., Standardized tests are not an effective tool for students with disabilities; Are the tests valid for this population? Tests are poorly designed especially for students with lower cognitive levels.). One teacher respondent nicely summed up the responses of his/her colleagues by stating, “Only when they are tested at ABILITY LEVEL rather than grade placement level and one year’s testing starts where the previous year’s testing left off can we see the true growth of the students.”

Finally, the smallest number of responses to question #9 fell under the theme requirements. Administrators were concerned about the difficulties high school special education teachers would have meeting the requirements and also questioned if the requirements would be the same for general education teachers. One administrator wrote, “Requirements of this type only reinforce my belief that decision-makers are oblivious to the realities of public education.” Teachers expressed the beliefs that requirements to be highly qualified should be met in college, through a master’s program, by length of time taught, or that “certification should be enough to classify you as a highly qualified teacher.” One teacher expressed the following: “I believe that all teachers should meet the requirements to be more effective to their students and the responsibilities they have.” No faculty responses fell into this theme.

**Question #9: Reaction to highly qualified requirements.** In response to question #9, “Overall, how do you feel about the mandate that all special education teachers must meet highly qualified requirements?” comments fell into the same five general themes indicated for question #8: (a) policy, (b) requirements, (c) test, (d) teachers, and (e) students.

The most responses made by each of the three groups surveyed related to the theme policy, but the different groups responded quite differently. Most of the administrators’ responses indicated that they felt positive about the requirement, a few wholeheartedly as indicated by comments like “It is necessary,” “All teachers should be HQ,” and “The requirements have made it easier for Special Education teachers to deliver the required curriculum, to collaborate with their regular education peers and become an integral part of our school curriculum team.” However, the most common positive responses indicated that the policy is a good idea but is currently difficult to implement. Examples of comments that supported this idea are “Good idea but very difficult to accomplish,” “I like the idea behind it if there were enough candidates in the applicant pool to support such mandates,” and “I feel it is a step in the right direction however we need to make sure we are not requiring more of special educators than the other personnel working in our system.” As in question #8, a response repeated throughout this theme was similar to this response, “Being highly qualified does not necessarily mean that they are good special educators.” A small number of administrators responded with negative attitudes toward the policy as indicated by the following: “One more unfunded mandate,” “Don’t like it one bit,” and “The term highly qualified is misleading, at least, and offensive at most.”
Teacher responses that fell under the theme *policy* were very similar to administrators. A majority of the teachers felt positive about the mandate, some as is (e.g., “I feel that it should be required to meet the guidelines”), but most felt it was a good idea but also expressed concerns. The concerns included teachers having to be highly qualified in multiple content areas, teacher retention, attraction of new teachers to the field, confusion over the policy, and the cost of taking extra classes to become highly qualified. Again, a number of responses challenged the notion that being highly qualified equates with being an effective teacher (i.e., “You can be an excellent teacher and not be highly qualified and you can be a lousy teacher and be highly qualified.”). Some teachers’ responses indicated that they felt negatively about the policy, as represented by the following comments: “I think this is an unfair mandate especially to the special education teacher. With all of these crazy policies, there won’t be any special education teachers that will put up with the job.”

In the end, the only ones that will suffer will be the students,” “I do not feel that you need to be ‘highly qualified’ to teach special ed.,” and “I am frustrated with the mandate because it doesn’t mean a thing.” Faculty responses that fell under the theme *policy* varied. Some agreed with the mandate (e.g., “I think these are important qualifications for teachers to meet.”) and some disagreed (e.g., “I do not believe that they need to be certified in each area they teach [i.e. math, science, reading, etc.]”).

A high number of responses related to the theme *requirements* were also made. In general, comments made by respondents in all three groups were similar. Each group commented on special education requirements being more difficult than general education requirements: “I agree with the concept but I don’t think the requirements should be any more rigorous than they are for general education teachers” (administrator), “Ok, if it mandated regular educators also need to get certified in Special Education” (faculty), and “Nobody has suggested that regular educators add multiple special education certifications in order to deliver content to special needs students. There is no difference, in my opinion” (teacher).

Respondents also indicated that the requirements for highly qualified at the high school level were difficult because of multiple content areas. Administrators and faculty expressed the opinion that collaboration between general and special educators would best serve the needs of the students. A number of teachers expressed the belief that knowing the core content as well as strategies to successfully instruct students with disabilities was crucial. However, some teachers also believed that experienced teachers should not have to meet the requirements.

Of the responses that met the definition for the theme *teachers*, almost all of the responses from all three groups addressed how the mandate to meet highly qualified status would affect the number of teachers wanting to enter the profession (fewer) and the number of special educators who would leave the profession. All groups expressed concern that the mandate would compound the existing problem of the shortage of special education teachers.

Two administrator responses were labeled as *test*: “That would be great, but not all individuals do well on written tests” and “…using test scores as the primary means of determining this is, if nothing else, scientifically unsound.” No faculty or teacher responses corresponded with this theme. Also, no responses fell under the theme *students*.

**Question #10: Recommendations for requirements to become highly qualified.** The responses to question #10 (“What do you believe the requirements should be for designating someone as a highly qualified special education teacher?”) were grouped according to similar responses, and 13 categories were developed that encompassed all responses. Examples of responses in the 13 categories are presented in Table 3. The researchers tallied the responses of the three groups’ surveys. The number of responses that fell into each category (by group) are presented in Table 4. The two categories with the most number of responses across all three groups were *degree and appropriate license*, indicating that all groups thought a college degree and state licensure should be a requirement of highly qualified. A fair number of administrators also thought that additional coursework and evaluation of teachers (by means other than standardized tests) should be part of the requirements. A number of teachers also indicated that evaluation (again, other than standardized tests) should be a requirement, as well as the amount of teacher experience. Furthermore, teachers indicated that being mentored by another teacher should be part of meeting the requirements. However, administrators and faculty did not mention mentors.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

The perceptions of the special educators surveyed in this study of the highly qualified teacher mandate are consistent with other research findings as well as the statements of various commentators. An earlier survey conducted shortly before full implementation of the highly qualified teacher mandate for special educators (Kossar et al., 2005; Mitchem et al., 2006) showed that rural special educators across the country feared a significant negative impact of this requirement on recruitment and retention of personnel in rural schools. Leading educators in teacher education and special education (Brownell, Bishop, & Sindelar, 2005) and in special education administration (Purcell, East, & Rude,
Table 3.

**Categories and Examples for Question #10**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Additional Coursework</td>
<td>additional special education coursework; core area; content area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate License</td>
<td>credentials; certification; endorsement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>bachelor’s; master’s; specific to teaching area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easier Requirements</td>
<td>easier requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>nonstandardized; reviews, portfolios, observations, demonstrated ability to work with students effectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Experience</td>
<td>on the job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>mentors for teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing Training</td>
<td>workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>non-specific or other codes don’t apply (ex: incentives, expertise and background, same as other teachers, satisfied with other requirements, seniority, love &amp; concern, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized Tests</td>
<td>Praxis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Progress</td>
<td>progress of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Experience</td>
<td>length of time teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
<td>collaboration, school involvement, attendance, service, good rapport</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2005) have argued that the requirement may well worsen the already significant critical shortages and attrition rates in rural special education. The responses of these teacher educators, administrators, and teachers show that this concern persists and also reveal the personal side of this issue: teachers express anger about the time, effort, and cost of obtaining additional qualifications to teach yet not receiving any more compensation for having higher qualifications; administrators worry about whether they will be able to recruit special educators who meet the highly qualified standard into local schools; and teacher educators worry that the best and brightest of their students may feel becoming a special educator is not as attractive as other career options.

In many respects, the ratings and comments of these respondents reflect the general discussion in the field of whether and how the highly qualified teacher mandate should be applied in special education. The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA specified that, like all general educators, special educators responsible for teaching academic content also must meet qualifications in the content areas, whether multi-subjects specialization at the elementary level or specific subject matter specializations at the secondary level. The highly qualified teacher mandate has not been as problematic at the elementary level because there is a more than adequate supply of elementary teachers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Some of the respondents in this survey reported little or no difficulty meeting the new requirements (teachers), finding teachers who were highly qualified (administrators), or incorporating content knowledge into training programs (teacher educators). This finding likely reflects the fact that all of the state’s personnel preparation programs require special education teachers to earn simultaneous certification in elementary education which means they are highly qualified for special education positions at the elementary level. However, at the secondary level, this can be a major issue because fewer teacher education students enroll in secondary education programs (United States Department of Education, 2002) and the credits needed to attain content area expertise leave no room in these programs for additional endorsement in special education. The respondents in this survey who reported problems obtaining highly qualified
### Table 4.

**Responses to Question #10 by Group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Administrators</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=101)</td>
<td>(n=13)</td>
<td>(n=184)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Coursework</td>
<td>12 (11%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>8 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate License</td>
<td>23 (21%)</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
<td>38 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>23 (21%)</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
<td>54 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easier Requirements</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>11 (10%)</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
<td>31 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Experience</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>18 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing Training</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20 (18%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>41 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized Tests</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Progress</td>
<td>5 (5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Experience</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>20 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>5 (2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* totals may not equal 100% because multiple responses could be made

Teacher status reflect the fact that secondary special educators are more likely to require additional training, often in multiple content areas (teachers); qualified secondary special educators are less available to take jobs (administrators); and training is more complicated since credits needed to attain content area expertise leave no room in these programs for additional endorsement in special education (teacher educators). Currently, no teacher education program in this state offers certification in secondary education with additional endorsement in special education so many individuals who take middle and high school positions are faced with the need to obtain additional content endorsements to keep their jobs. Together, these findings suggest that the impact of the highly qualified teacher requirement for special educators may affect some teachers and schools more than others. In a recent position paper posted on the web site of the Council for Exceptional Children, Mary Brownell (2009), a leading researcher in teacher education and special education and director of the National Comprehensive Center to Improve Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development proposes dual preparation in general and special education for all special educators (with higher pay in recognition of greater expertise) as a way to address this issue.

This study further documents the relationship of the highly qualified teacher provisions to the staffing issues faced by many rural schools and illustrates how they are experienced by special educators in all professional roles. Recruitment and retention of special educators have been major concerns in rural education since Congress mandated a free appropriate public education for all students with disabilities in 1975 that have been discussed in many issues of *Rural Special Education Quarterly*. In West Virginia, state personnel data (West Virginia Department of Education, n.d.) reveal that more than 10% of special educators were working on permit or out-of-field authorizations during the years from 2001 to 2008. Teacher supply-demand problems in this state have been attributed to failure to attract candidates to the
smaller and more remote rural school districts, migration of qualified teachers to schools in adjacent states where salaries may be $10,000 to $20,000 higher (Hill, 2007), and attrition resulting from the stress of limited resources in many high need schools (Hirsch, Freitas, Church, & Vilar, 2009). The ratings and comments of these special educators suggest that they have first-hand experience of seeing teacher education graduates look for other employment, of losing valued teachers to higher paying positions out of state, and of watching favorite colleagues drop out of teaching. Sadly, the coming wave of retirements anticipated in the next 5 years is expected to worsen shortages across the state such that the West Virginia Department of Education has appointed a Teacher Shortage Task Force to address this pressing issue.

The strong emotional responses to the proposal for a highly qualified effective teacher requirement (evidenced by words such as “ludicrous,” “nightmare,” and “rubbish”) reveal that many respondents may feel devalued by policy makers and powerless in influencing the national debate on what constitutes a highly qualified teacher despite the fact that they are the ones closest to the teaching-learning act. Some responses suggest that making teachers accountable for student learning without providing them with adequate resources is not only inherently unfair, but it may ultimately prove to be a counter-productive solution by driving effective teachers out of the field. Professional organizations representing teacher interests in both general education (National Education Association, n.d.) and in special education (Council for Exceptional Children, n.d.) have expressed opposition to proposals that would modify highly qualified teacher status in this way on the grounds that this requirement would unfairly place primary responsibility for student outcomes on teachers without appropriate consideration of the many individual and contextual factors that influence student test performance. If this approach is considered by Congress in the near future, it may well face significant resistance from a united general education and special education community.

Perhaps the most striking (and in some respects, the most troublesome) finding of this study is how clearly the ratings and comments of these respondents reflect the centrality of the critical teacher shortages in the field of special education. The professional literature is replete with the discussions of academics about the significant and chronic supply-demand imbalance in special education (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). Nevertheless, the number of times these teachers, administrators, and teacher educators referred to aspects of the shortage suggests that special educators at all levels are all too aware of the issues related to recruiting and retaining special education personnel and their impact on daily practice in both personnel preparation and service delivery. Their comments reveal that they view the highly qualified teacher provision not only in the light of its effect on their own programs and careers, but they also recognize its broader implications for the field as whole. On the one hand, this indicates some solidarity in the discipline in the face of a common challenge, but, on the other hand, it illustrates the extent to which the shortages may have come to dominate current thinking and overshadow other important concerns.

To anyone who has studied recruitment and retention of teachers for rural schools or the factors related to teacher shortages and attrition rates in special education, the results of this study will not seem surprising. These respondents confirm what has been known for many years: rural schools face significant problems in staffing special education positions and rural special educators often perceive national policies as creating additional challenges. A recent article in Exceptional Children (Boe et al., 2008) argued that the teacher turnover rate in special education is similar to that of many professions and may be expected to endure, so the most efficient solution is likely to be increasing the supply of educators available to replace those who leave the field. If this is the case, then the discipline of special education will need help in increasing the numbers and enhancing the qualifications of special educators to work in rural schools.

The situation in rural special education is not unlike the situation in high needs schools since both areas face critical shortages with respect to quantity as well as quality of teachers. The National Academy of Education (2009) recently issued a policy paper that argues for a greater federal role in teacher preparation to ensure enough highly qualified teachers to work in the nation’s high need schools. On September 30, 2009, the Obama administration announced it will distribute millions of dollars in federal funds to support reform of teacher education programs and professional development activities to improve teacher quality (“Education Secretary Duncan announces. . . ” 2009). The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2009) just issued legislative recommendations for the pending reauthorization of IDEA that urge the federal government to offer recruitment and employment incentives for individuals to obtain dual certification in general and special education and to work with students with disabilities in hard-to-staff schools including those located in rural and high need communities. Perhaps such a nationwide initiative with substantial financial support can calm the fears of the respondents in this study and the many rural special education teachers, administrators, and teacher educators like them across the country and provide the resources needed to truly create a highly qualified special education teaching force for the years to come.
References


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