

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Teacher Quality and Policy Implications

By Hilda C. Heine, EdD

In recent years, the debate over teacher quality and preparation has gained new urgency. The impetus for this comes from a local push for accountability for student achievement as well as from the U.S. federal government and the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) legislation. The urgency is noted in the following excerpt:

Teacher data collected in 2003, from all of the U.S.-affiliated Pacific entities with the exception of Hawai'i, confirmed the challenge and the demand for putting qualified teachers in every classroom. Moreover, the demand for quality teachers has reached a level of urgency in some entities (e.g., the Republic of the Marshall Islands [RMI] and Chuuk in the FSM) where more than half of the teachers hold only high school degrees, and in other entities (e.g., Guam) where teacher turnover is a problem (PREL, 2005).

The NCLB has clearly laid out its definition of what a *highly qualified teacher* is and insists states meet this definition by the end of school year 2005–2006. In the Pacific region outside of Hawai'i, the NCLB means different things for different jurisdictions, based on their relationship with the federal government and existing policies on teacher quality. They may not be bound by the strict timeline. However, the direction the NCLB is taking the states, including Hawai'i, has clear implications for the territories and the Freely Associated States, whether or not NCLB provisions apply.

Regardless of whether the push is local, national, or region-wide, departments and ministries of education in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific are examining their own teacher education policies to ensure that: (a) minimum standards are set for certification; (b) issues of content knowledge, teaching pedagogy and academic competencies are addressed; (c) support structures are in place to help teachers perform their job well; and (d) salaries appropriate for the local market and the profession have been considered.

Departments and ministries of education also are communicating higher teacher expectations, followed by actions requiring teachers to demonstrate that they meet minimum qualifications. Obtaining a degree is no longer adequate. Teachers must also demonstrate subject matter skills on teacher tests such as the Praxis I and II (used in Hawai'i, the CNMI, and the territories) or other nationally developed tests like the FSM National Standardized Test for Teachers (NSTT) or the Marshall Islands English Language Test

(MIELT), which assesses teachers' English proficiency levels. These are high-stakes tests and teachers are quickly learning that acceptable performance is required of them as much as it is for their students. Thus, enrolling in test preparation courses is becoming just as common as enrolling in courses leading to a degree.

But how does one raise standards of teacher quality when,

in some cases, the level of education of teachers is only 2 years above their own students? Limited resources and access to 4-year education programs are reasons cited for endorsement of traditional 2-year teacher preparation programs. In a short program, however, there is not enough time to teach all the cognitive abilities and pedagogical knowledge required. Endorsing such short teacher preparation programs sets teachers up for failure. Teachers are simply not prepared to



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▷ Dr. Hilda C. Heine

deliver higher-level student results and to expect them to be unfair. School systems cannot continue to expect luxury car performance for the price of a bicycle.

Research has shown that teachers' general cognitive ability is the most important factor in making them effective. While this does not necessarily mean that a longer teacher preparation program is the answer, it does imply that the profession has to be selective in terms of the cognitive abilities that it requires in teacher preparation programs and be very sure those abilities form the foundation of such a training program.

Furthermore, using technology or other means to extend training options and opportunities to teachers, particularly teachers in remote locations, should be viewed as a matter of policy rather than a luxury. Whatever it takes, communities must ensure teacher education guarantees teachers are knowledgeable about the learners, the subject matter they teach, and the art of teaching.

Hilda C. Heine, EdD can be contacted at heineh@prel.org. ★