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Exploring State Policy Regarding Teachers Removing License Endorsements: Short Term and Long Term Policy Implications

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Abstract

This study explores and begins baseline documentation of state policies governing teachers' voluntary removal of endorsement areas from their licenses. Through a survey of state licensure officers we find that most states allow teachers to remove endorsements, though the specifics of how this can be done vary from state to state. The No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act may help motivate teachers to remove endorsements. By defining teacher qualifications and setting expectations that all students will achieve adequate yearly progress on state examinations, these two pieces of legislation place additional pressure on teachers of general population and at-risk students. Thus, federal policy contributes to a dilemma playing out at the state level: Policies enacted to improve classroom instruction may increase pressure on qualified teachers that potentially drives some of them away from special needs classrooms that most require high quality service. As demands on them mount, teachers may look for ways to relieve some stress points. Removing a license endorsement becomes one such tool to avoid teaching in classrooms of students with learning challenges. If significant numbers of teachers remove license endorsements, labor market dislocations may follow. Additional study is needed in the future to further document how states do or do not regulate endorsement removal, the extent to



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which teachers are aware of and have utilized this option, and how school, district, and state administrators and decision makers respond to license endorsement removal.

Keywords: teacher licensure; state and federal policy; policy dilemmas

Introduction

Teachers' licenses serve as their professional lifeblood. For at least the last three decades, establishing and enforcing teacher credential standards has rested with state governments. Yet, requirements found in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have added a new federal expectation that teachers will meet certain academic content standards by requiring that they comply with definitions in those laws of highly qualified new, veteran, and special education teachers. Because state and school district NCLB funds are linked to documenting how teacher qualifications are aligned with these federal requirements, this is a high stakes provision. For some new and veteran teachers, particularly if they want the ability to teach multiple subjects or multiple grade levels, highly qualified standards translate into taking additional college level course work or documenting their competence through an examination in each subject they plan to teach. It has been common for teachers to add endorsements (additional areas in which they are certified to teach) to their licenses in an attempt to make themselves more marketable. The reverse also is possible. That is, in most states teachers may remove endorsements to control whom and what they teach. This study explores a previously undocumented phenomenon of teachers requesting that states strip an endorsement area from their licenses as a way to avoid being required to teach in a particular subject area or program.

NCLB and IDEA have highlighted the need for capable teachers in both inclusion and special needs classrooms. Under both laws individual schools and districts must show improvement each year on their state's K-12 examinations and the data must be reported to the federal government disaggregated by sub-groups of children (such as special education or limited English proficient). If the test scores for only one sub-group do not reflect progress, the school is described as in need of improvement. This creates a high stress environment in which school administrators and local officials could reward or punish an individual teacher according to the examination scores of that teacher's students. Some teachers may fear that their assignment to a classroom of children with learning challenges who do not perform as well on the state's standardized test as more typical children, might place their jobs and careers in jeopardy. In these cases, the individual may elect to leave teaching entirely or attempt to transfer to a classroom of children who are expected to test well on the state examination. Teachers committed to their profession would not want to leave it but could worry that even if their transfer is successful, they are vulnerable to being moved back to a classroom of children with learning challenges at a later time.

The option of removing a license endorsement may give concerned teachers a sense of control over one aspect of their professional lives and address unhappiness as it relates to their teaching assignments. Even if labor market or other conditions change in the future, endorsement removal protects the tenured teacher from being compelled to teach a subject or grade level she is not interested in teaching. Knowing that teachers can migrate permanently from one type of teaching to another through endorsement removal raises two questions: (a) What are state policies regarding this option? And, (b) What are the policy consequences of teachers making this kind of choice? We set out to answer these questions in this study.

Context

Teacher Supply and Demand

The supply and demand forces in the labor market for public school teachers have some unique characteristics. K–12 teaching is a large enterprise representing roughly 2.7 percent of the U.S. workforce (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2005); it is directly impacted by increases or decreases in the school age population (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2005); workers are primarily white and female (NCES, 2005); the demand for teachers is a function of state or local rather than national needs (American Association for Employment in Education [AAEE], 2004); an increased supply of new teachers in one part of the country may not relieve shortages in another area (AAEE, 2004); and because of state licensure policies, the market is segmented by teaching field. The matter of segmentation is an important consideration for this study.

When a teacher adds an endorsement to a teaching license, it means an individual may teach in more than one field. Thus, two or more segments of the teaching labor market, such as K–3 elementary and special education could be in competition for the expertise found in one teacher. If that individual is hired to teach special education, this results in one fewer person available to teach elementary school general education but has a neutral effect on the total supply of teachers. Teachers' decisions to add endorsements to their licenses indicate a certain amount of practicality with regard to how they present themselves to prospective employers. They want to improve the probability that they will be hired. Adding endorsements is not limited to actions by pre-service teacher candidates, however. After taking additional coursework, a teacher may generally add an endorsement area at any time during his or her career (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education & Certification [NASDTEC], 2002). Thus, adding endorsements may help a teacher get a job, but does nothing to address the overall supply of educators. In the case of teachers with multiple endorsements, a job filled in one segment (or teaching field) may be seen as leaving a vacancy in another segment. By the same token, if a teacher removes a teaching endorsement, it does not affect the aggregate number of individuals able to teach but instead reduces the number of personnel available in one teaching field. As we discuss later in this article, the initial data from state governments regarding endorsement removal requests suggest that the endorsement area most often removed is special education. Consequently, a field that struggles to recruit and retain teachers may have its supply further diminished when teachers currently in the field permanently remove the option of teaching in it.

Teacher Dissatisfaction and Employment Options

Luekens, Lyter, and Fox (2004) report that between the 1999–2000 and 2000–2001 school years roughly seven percent of teachers left teaching. However, these aggregate data mask variances by school and community as well as by teaching fields (Loeb & Reininger, 2004; Guin, 2004). McLeskey, Tyler, and Flippin (2004) suggest that attrition of special education teachers is in the 13 to 15 percent range while Loeb and Reininger add that secondary level teachers in science fields are somewhat more likely to leave teaching than other educators. Reasons for leaving the teaching profession vary. In some cases teachers move to take employment in a higher paying field, which may account for a slightly higher attrition rate among science teachers. Looking beyond economic issues, teachers traditionally have offered the following reasons for leaving: unhappiness with teaching assignment or amount of time devoted to teaching, dissatisfaction with level of support

from administration, classroom intrusions, working conditions, paperwork, school violence/safety, and classroom discipline problems (AAEE, 2003; AAEE, 2004; Loeb & Reininger, 2004; Luekens et al., 2004; Guin, 2004; McLeskey, et al., 2004; and Ingersoll, 2003a). Arguably, a teacher could deal with most of these factors by moving to a school or district with a more positive work environment rather than leaving education altogether. However, in recent years, the list of reasons for leaving teaching has expanded to include state and federal mandates (AAEE, 2004). This reflects a new level of worry for teachers and one that even if they move to another school they cannot escape. When teachers believe they are powerless to change circumstances that affect their working conditions, they look for and are receptive to new strategies to improve their circumstances.

Endorsement Removal as a Professional Alternative

License endorsement removal is an option teachers can exercise to protect themselves from what they perceive to be less desirable assignments. Under current “highly qualified teacher” guidelines, it is more difficult to coerce a teacher who is officially unlicensed to teach in a field he or she wishes to avoid. Removing endorsements appears to be a potentially powerful strategy for teachers to move from one kind of teaching assignment to another and insure that they can stay there.

Movement of teachers within the profession is characterized by Ingersoll (2003a) as migration, with attrition reserved for instances when teachers leave the profession entirely. Although Ingersoll’s work generally applies to teachers who move from school-to-school or district-to-district, we believe migration also describes shifts from one teaching responsibility to another within the same school. Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2003) describe teacher movement as a function of alternative opportunities. In their model, certain working conditions are tested to determine which are predictors of teacher attrition. They conclude that working conditions associated with schools serving particular types of students motivate decisions to leave teaching or seek employment in other school districts. They suggest the type of student served (e.g., special education or English language learner) is a proxy for more specific challenges, such as disciplinary problems, school system bureaucracies, school-site leadership, and the perception that the teaching environment is not safe. We argue that teacher migration from special needs to inclusion classrooms, possibly facilitated by removal of the special education endorsement, is consistent with Hanushek et al.’s (2003) model.

The problem of how teacher shortages are exacerbated when teachers move from one field to another is documented by McLesky et al. (2004) who report that special education teachers migrate to general education classrooms in greater numbers than general education teachers move into special education. Combined with the current shortage of special education teachers, losing teachers in the future who are prepared and licensed in special education is particularly problematic. Billingsley (2004) identifies a series of factors similar to those of Hanushek et al. (2003) that may contribute to teachers’ decisions to leave special education, i.e., work environment, school climate, role uncertainty, paperwork, and caseload. Although Hanushek et al. did not look specifically at the special education field we suggest that when working conditions identified by McLesky, et al. (2004) become loaded with negative influences, such as with the addition of new licensure requirements in federal law, special education teachers are even more likely to seek alternative opportunities. There is some evidence that one factor, when it interacts with others, can trigger teacher migration. Bohrnstedt and Stechter’s (2000) evaluation of California’s class size reduction program led them to speculate that an increase in the shortage of special education and English as a second language teachers may have been due to teachers deciding to transfer out of these challenging assignments to K–3 classrooms with fewer students overall and possibly no special needs children.

Methods

During 2003–2004, we surveyed the state teacher education certification officers in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the individual who oversees placements in Department of Defense schools (N=52) to determine if endorsements could be removed, in what circumstances, whether state rules existed for endorsement removal and which endorsements were most often removed. Our survey instrument was developed and pilot tested on the executive committee of NASDTEC. The organization endorsed the study and offered to send the survey to its members electronically. After we adjusted the survey based on that group's feedback it was e-mailed to all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense Education Agency. Individuals in 34 states/territories returned surveys, achieving a response rate of 65 percent.

The survey contains check-off questions about state policies and invites respondents to answer open-ended questions or to add explanation. Survey respondents were also asked to report how many teachers have requested endorsement removal during the past five years. Our data analysis focuses on frequency distributions. Any validity threats to conclusions drawn from this data are rooted in participants not understanding one or more questions asked or not following directions given in the survey. We did not detect evidence that these validity threats were substantial enough to compromise findings.

After analyzing survey data, we conducted a group interview of four school administrators and one teacher from rural and suburban school districts in Northern Virginia. We had two purposes in doing so: (a) to obtain a school site perspective that would help us to understand the response from the Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education; and (b) to pilot a set of interview questions that we anticipate using in future research on this topic. All five participants are our doctoral students and were therefore easily accessible to us. We asked this group to describe any experiences they may have had with teachers requesting to remove endorsements, and we asked the teacher her perception of endorsement removal as a mechanism to protect her from undesirable teaching assignments.

Results

Opportunities for teachers to remove endorsements from their licenses are widespread, but not widely known or understood. State certification officers in only five states reported that endorsements could not be removed from teaching credentials under any circumstances. It is common for teachers to have the possibility to remove one or more endorsements at the time that they apply for licensure in a state to which they have moved. Twelve state officials, or 35.3 percent of those responding, reported this possibility. It is of interest that some states have no legislative or regulatory restrictions on endorsement removal (12 states, 35.3%) or have state policy that allows for endorsement removal if requested by the teacher (11 states, 32.4%). See Table 1 for a full description of the conditions under which teachers may remove endorsements from their credentials.

Table 1

Circumstances Under Which a Teacher May Remove Endorsements

| State Certification Officers' Responses (N = 34) | |
|--|------------|
| None | 5 (14.7%) |
| New to State | 12 (35.3%) |
| No Prohibitions | 12 (35.3%) |
| Silent Policy—Case-by-Case | 4 (11.8%) |
| If Requested by Teacher | 11 (32.4%) |
| Only if Clerical Error | 5 (14.7%) |

(Total response is greater than 100% because respondents could select more than one answer.)

Despite the apparently open door on endorsement removal, this option for teachers appears to be unimportant to most state departments of education. Of the 26 state officials responding to the survey question about how many teachers have removed endorsements in the past five years, 18 (69.2%) reported that they keep no data regarding endorsement removal requests. In three states—Florida, Michigan, and Pennsylvania—endorsement removal is more of an issue than in other states. These states report that more than 50 teachers have requested to have one or more endorsements removed in the past five years. (See Table 2.) Officials in all three states report that special education is the area that is most often removed. (Florida also reported laboratory science and elementary education.) An additional six states (Alaska, Idaho, Iowa, Montana, Nebraska, and New Hampshire) reported that special education is the endorsement most often removed, even though the numbers are small or they do not formally track these data.

Table 2

Number of Teachers Requesting Endorsement Removal in Past Five Years

| State Certification Officers' Responses (N = 26) | |
|--|------------|
| Keep no Data | 18 (69.2%) |
| 0–10 | 5 (19.2%) |
| 11–50 | 0 |
| Over 50 | 3 (11.5%) |

In most states, although teachers have the possibility of removing one or more endorsements from their credentials there have been few requests to do so. The lack of data collection makes it somewhat difficult to form hard and fast conclusions about what is happening, but we speculate that there are at least three possible reasons for few documented requests: First, and possibly the least likely, teachers in these states are all satisfied with their teaching assignments and have entertained no thoughts of leaving. Second, the ability to remove a teaching endorsement is an invisible policy, allowed but not publicized. And, third, it may occur more often, but state officials have decided it is not important to retain a data base documenting the phenomenon. We anticipate investigating and testing these alternative theories through future state case studies.

Although most states allow teachers to remove endorsements from their licenses, they are not consistent about how removal occurs. Open-ended responses to the survey indicate that there is a spectrum of regulation that runs from placing bureaucratic hurdles in teachers' way to letting teachers control their endorsements. Virginia, for example, requires teachers first to petition their school districts for endorsement removal. If the district agrees, then the district must send a request for removal to the Virginia Department of Education. Under these conditions it is not surprising that the Virginia official responding to the survey reported that requests for endorsement removal

are very rare. In contrast, the Oregon Commission on Teacher Credentialing recently determined that the “teacher owns her or his license” and can therefore have endorsements removed at will.

This study inadvertently produced evidence that at least one state had not thoroughly developed a process for removal of license endorsements prior to receiving the survey. It was reported back to us by the Georgia state certification officer that after responding to our survey, conversations began regarding whether the state should have a clearer license endorsement removal policy. As a result, decision makers in Georgia passed Rule 505–2–.35 Voluntary Deletion of a Certificate Field. The Georgia system is of note because it addresses both the ability of teachers to have a measure of control over their professional life and the staffing needs of schools and districts. Each year between October 1 and the last day of the following February a certificate holder may apply for and be granted the voluntary deletion of any certificate field(s). To allow school districts time to plan for possible staffing changes, the teacher’s new certificate, which will not have the deleted field(s), is not issued or effective until the following July 1.

If state policies are ambiguous and flexible for removing endorsements, they also appear to be flexible about reinstating them. Twenty-one (80.8%) of the respondents to this question reported that a teacher may reinstate an endorsement that has previously been removed. This finding is to be expected because it is in a state’s interest to have teachers certified to teach in multiple areas.

The results from our group interview pilot supported what we concluded from the survey. Interview participants from Virginia reported cases of teachers, predominantly special education, requesting removal of one or more endorsements. Virginia is a state that uses very specific designations for special education endorsements, creating a situation in which teachers appear to want to restrict the kinds of special education students they will teach. The most common example within our interview group was for a teacher to request removal of the Emotionally Disturbed endorsement to end the possibility of working with that very difficult student population. Yet, motivation to remove endorsements is not limited to special education teachers. We heard of a case of a health and physical education teacher being tired of teaching driver education and requesting removal of that endorsement. The teacher in our group was also clear that she would request to remove the grade 4–8 endorsement she has if she felt threatened with being forced into a grade level she does not wish to teach.

Virginia’s extra step of getting approval from the central office probably prevents many requests from getting to the state level. Despite their awareness that teachers in their districts wanted to remove endorsements, the administrators participating in our interview were not aware of their districts’ procedures for doing so. Teachers and administrators alike are probably confused about how teachers actually remove endorsements. We suspect this confusion is typical across the country and helps to keep the number of teachers removing endorsements low.

Policy Implications

Policies embedded in federal laws such as NCLB and IDEA that are intended to improve the quality of classroom instruction add additional stress factors for teachers that, combined with stressors previously in place, have the potential to motivate teachers to remove endorsements from their licenses. Teachers’ taking advantage of the opportunity to assert greater control over their teaching assignments through making changes to their licenses could exacerbate teacher shortages in specific fields and hamper school districts’ abilities to comply with NCLB and IDEA expectations. We first consider this policy dilemma between a drive for higher teaching standards and driving teachers out of high needs areas by examining how teachers might react to the policy environment, followed by a discussion of possible consequences for administrators.

Implications for Teachers

Teaching special needs portions of the student population has never been easy. Provisions in NCLB and IDEA that students from all groups, including special education, make adequate yearly progress (AYP) and meet district testing and graduation standards has moved the goal post for special education teachers a substantial distance. Moreover, many of these same teachers are now being told that their special education teaching credential is not sufficient for them to be considered a highly qualified teacher (N. Conners, personal communication, July 28, 2005). Given this kind of additional pressure and the general fatigue that comes as teachers age in the profession, migration to other areas seems to be a logical move. Nine states out of 34 (26.5%) reporting that the most frequent requests for endorsement removal come from special education teachers supports our belief that not only are teachers moving out of special education classrooms, they are taking steps to insure that they will never be required to go back. This is further supported by our group interview and an open-ended response on one of the surveys that emphasize the importance of the segmented nature of the teacher labor market:

Once a person is hired in special education and then requests and receives another position . . . the person does not want to be considered for another special education position. This is a prime reason there are so many special education teachers in a school system and a shortage of special education teachers in the classroom. (Idaho)

As opportunities for endorsement removal become more widely known, greater numbers of teachers of special education, English as a second language, or particular subject areas or grade levels may choose to narrow the areas in which they are officially licensed to teach. In a continuing tight labor market for teachers in hard to staff fields and locations, teachers choosing what they will and will not teach is another variable in the complex education personnel supply and demand puzzle.

Implications for Administrators

School principals may find themselves in staffing predicaments if they cannot count on a teacher being available to teach a particular subject from one year to the next. State laws and regulations have long required that teachers be assigned to courses and levels for which they are credentialed. But in some instances state agency officials have also been permissive about giving districts, schools, and teachers flexibility in times of severe shortages, while an individual is completing licensure requirements, or if the teacher is teaching the majority of her or his schedule in credentialed areas. NCLB limited this flexibility with the “highly qualified” provision for teachers. Endorsement removal creates the possibility that teachers will become more autonomous through their control over their qualifications. A talented special education teacher who prefers a K–3 non-special education classroom can remove her special education endorsement and no longer be highly qualified to teach special education. The principal is now prevented from placing a teacher who was once highly qualified for special education back into that type of classroom.

Anxiety regarding endorsement removal among the school administrators we interviewed was palpable. If the right to remove endorsements is more widely exercised, then these administrators anticipate difficulties staffing their schools and maintaining schedules. They also foresee teachers manipulating their endorsements to avoid teaching in particularly difficult areas of state testing, algebra being offered as the most obvious example.

Central office administrators who manage personnel and keep track of licensure are caught in a manner similar to principals. Having built the teacher pool in the district to reflect classroom needs, that pool might now change right before the human resources director's eyes. If teachers reduce endorsements in meaningful numbers, districts might be faced with more shortages in critical areas and actual surpluses in subjects or grade levels generally considered less difficult to teach. This could lead to a situation in which a reduction in force is necessary to allow a district to hire in areas such as special education for which the district now has too few highly qualified teachers. Teacher choice could be substantially narrowed by such a move that would very likely bring on the wrath of the local teachers' association.

In the four districts represented in our group interview, endorsement removal does not yet appear to be on the radar screen for district administrators. None of the principals or assistant principals participating in the interview reported district policies for handling endorsement removal requests. Furthermore, when confronted with these requests from teachers, none of the administrators was sure how the request needed to be handled. We anticipate some degree of chaos for these districts if teacher requests increase substantially.

Implications for State Officials

We see in our survey results that state policies reflect a variety of approaches to endorsement removal. In some states agency officials regulate the teacher labor market by not allowing endorsement removal for any reason other than clerical error. Most states allow endorsement removal but appear neither to have taken it on as an issue nor to have put much energy behind notifying teachers of their right to remove endorsements. State officials, similar to school district personnel officers, may wake up one day to find that they have lost substantial influence over their pools of highly qualified teachers.

Conclusion

Endorsement removal opportunities are widespread, yet practices vary from state-to-state. School, district, and state officials would be wise to realize they may be playing the school staffing game under a new set of rules. The door out of special needs and high-stakes testing classrooms is already open for teachers. An unintended consequence of the push for greater accountability represented by the highly qualified teacher standard may be for teachers to narrow their qualifications. This places districts in a dilemma where they have two poor choices: (a) establish policies to limit endorsement removal, perhaps driving teachers out of the district or out of the profession; or (b) assign teachers according to district needs and teacher availability, ignoring the highly qualified designation and risking federal sanctions. As with any dilemma, districts seem likely to engage in a little of both as they cope with the daily need to educate children. The Georgia example of allowing teachers to remove license endorsements at their discretion, but doing so according to a timeline that allows for timely replacement of migrating teachers, is one way of compromising the dilemma. Whether or not replacement teachers can be found and labor market segments can be managed remain open questions for Georgia and the rest of the states.

Future Research

We believe that license endorsement removal is a rich field for exploration of policy issues, evaluation of policy choices, and recommendations for policy development. The combination of NCLB and IDEA intended to improve education and teachers having greater control over where and how they provide their services places all school age children, but especially those in difficult-to-teach classrooms, schools, and districts, at risk for having no teacher at all. Further policy research can help sort out the issues and communicate the consequences of various responses to this problem.

A new survey of state licensure directors is an appropriate next step. We want to learn if states are changing policies and procedures with regard to if and how license endorsements can be removed. Will states try to regulate their teacher labor markets more tightly? If so, what are the effects, if any, with regard to teachers' tendencies to leave teaching? On the other hand, if state officials are aware of the potential labor market shifts as a result of licensure removal, are they doing anything to mitigate the problems we anticipate? If so, what are they doing and how well is it working?

Superintendents play an important role in maintaining adequate supplies of teacher candidates for their school districts, but their hands appear largely tied with the "highly qualified" requirement of NCLB. What alternatives, if any, are available to district officials in staffing all classrooms with highly qualified teachers when teachers may be changing the areas in which they are certified to teach? Are principals ready for teachers' actions? How will principals cope with their staffing needs in the face of endorsement removal?

To understand this issue in greater depth, we need to know how teachers think about their endorsements. How aware are they of the option of removing an endorsement? It would be helpful to test our basic premise that if teachers who are currently dissatisfied with their assignments know about endorsement removal, they will exercise this right in order to retain a measure of control over their work lives and improve job security.

In an effort to understand more deeply how state officials, district administrators, principals, and teachers are responding to endorsement removal, we anticipate creating case studies of states that are actively dealing with the issue. Our experience in the pilot group interview demonstrates that we could learn a great deal by comparing and contrasting state policy (or the lack thereof) with perspectives and actions at the local level. Case studies of this nature will help to explain how state and federal policy are implemented, altered, or ignored at the local level and how (or if) the pressures we identify in this paper are impacting teacher labor markets.

It is clear that we are just now seeing the first small effects of endorsement removal, though the potential for more activity in this area exists. The whole picture is by no means clear. It is our hope that this initial study opens the door to richer data collection and analysis that will help us to understand the interplay among federal efforts to improve the quality of instruction, state regulation of teacher certification, and teachers' efforts to influence the subjects, grade levels, and students whom they teach.

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