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The Every Student Succeeds Act: “Highly Qualified Teacher” Requirements

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) for four years and enacts significant changes from the previous iteration of the law, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Compared to NCLB, ESSA reduces federal intervention in state education policies and programs and assigns substantial decision-making authority to states.

One of the key areas where states have regained decision-making authority from the federal government is over teacher qualifications. Over the last 15 years, NCLB required states to adopt specific criteria related to teacher qualifications; those requirements have been removed from ESSA and determinations of appropriate teacher qualifications are now made at the sole discretion of the state.

“Highly Qualified Teacher” Provisions under NCLB (2001-2015). NCLB significantly expanded the role of the federal government in prescribing teacher qualifications. As a matter of fact, a major objective of NCLB was to ensure that all students had “highly qualified teachers” in core content areas. Federal law defined a “highly qualified teacher” (HQT) as one who met three criteria: 1) holds at least a bachelor’s degree from a four-year institution; 2) holds full state certification; and 3) demonstrates competence in each core academic subject in which a teacher teaches. These HQT requirements applied to every teacher who provided direct instruction in core content areas, including elementary certified teachers working at the middle level, special educators, alternative educators, and teachers of English as a second language (ESL). These requirements had significant impacts on Pennsylvania’s education policy.

“Highly Qualified Teacher” Provisions under ESSA (2016- present). ESSA rolls back all of the prescriptive HQT requirements that were established under NCLB. Now, any teacher who meets state certification requirements automatically is “highly qualified.” ***Under ESSA, states have sole authority to determine all teacher certification requirements including which teachers are qualified to deliver core content instruction.***

Implications for Pennsylvania. Even though the federal HQT requirements included in NCLB no longer apply, the immediate impact of this roll-back in Pennsylvania may be minimal because the system has already been redesigned to comply with the HQT provisions. Over the last 15 years, all experienced teachers in the Commonwealth have met HQT requirements through a Praxis exam, college coursework, or other state program. In addition, the state’s teacher certification

regulations were amended to ensure that all new special education and middle level teachers hold content-area certificates. Every teacher preparation institution in the Commonwealth revised its preparation programs to comply with the state certification requirements that were adopted to meet HQT requirements. These revisions can be unwound but not easily or quickly.

In response to the new flexibility allowed under ESSA, the Pennsylvania Department of Education plans to convene a workgroup to determine if any changes to certification and staffing requirements are appropriate. Classroom teachers will be invited to participate in the workgroup along with other education stakeholders.

PSEA believes that any changes to certification or staffing requirements should be designed to ensure that all teachers continue to feel well-prepared and qualified for all teaching positions to which they can be assigned. In addition, it is critical for PDE to seek meaningful input from educators—particularly educators who work in areas such as special education, alternative, education, middle level education, and ESL—prior to making any decisions about possible certification or staffing flexibility.

For More Information. PSEA members may contact Carla Claycomb in PSEA’s Education Services Department, cclaycomb@psea.org to learn more about the Every Student Succeeds Act. PSEA members also can view a 1-hour webinar for Act 48 credit that explains the contents of the new ESSA in more detail on PSEA’s [Online Learning Portal](#).

