



Teacher re-certification

Legislative testimony by James A. Peyser

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I am testifying today in my capacity as chairman of the Board of Education in support of House Bill 1692, which would establish a testing program as part of teacher re-certification. Since the Board has not yet taken a position on this bill, the views I will express today are my own.

Before addressing the issue of teacher testing, we should consider why we even bother certifying and re-certifying teachers in the first place. According to Chapter 71, Section 38G, the commissioner has the authority to issue and renew certificates to applicants who can demonstrate that they possess "knowledge of subject matter" and other "competencies" or "teaching skills," sufficient to meet standards established by the board of education. It is important to note that the law does not differentiate between initial certification and re-certification-applicants must be able to satisfy the board's requirements for knowledge and skill in either case. In addition, the statutory language specifically governing re-certification requires that teachers successfully complete an individual professional development program every five years that "meets the subject matter knowledge and teaching skill requirements set by the board" and enhances a teacher's ability to "improve student learning." In sum, we certify and re-certify teachers in order to ensure that all teachers meet a minimum threshold of competence. How then is this statutory purpose to be fulfilled?

We can and do require candidates to acquire academic degrees from accredited colleges and universities. We can and do require candidates to complete programs at approved schools of education. We can and do require candidates to continue their education through courses, workshops and conferences. But what do these educational experiences tell us about the competence of any individual teacher? The sad fact is they tell us next to nothing. In the absence of reliable content standards, we can have no assurance that colleges or professional development providers are offering rigorous or meaningful courses. Moreover, even if the courses are substantive, we have no assurance that students taking and passing those courses learned the material or acquired the skills. Basically, all these requirements tell us is whether applicants are making an effort, not whether they are competent.

There is one thing we now do that does in fact tell us something about individual competence. As of April 1998, Massachusetts has required that every candidate for a provisional educator certificate take and pass a two-part exam, covering communication and literacy skills and subject matter knowledge. Is this test perfect? No. Does it tell us who will be good teachers? No. All it tells us is whether a prospective teacher has basic competence in the English language and in her own field of specialization. Certainly this is a necessary, albeit not sufficient requirement for a good teacher.

As I just stated, this test applies only to applicants for provisional certification-in other words, prospective teachers. What tools does the commissioner have to determine the competency of practicing teachers who apply for re-certification? The answer is none.

A well-designed test is an efficient and reliable method for determining basic competency. The legislature long ago endorsed this view when it mandated tests for incoming teachers. It also endorsed this view when it mandated tests for students as a condition of high school graduation. The issue then

is not whether a test could be a useful tool as part of re-certification or whether it is consistent with the spirit of the existing law, but whether it is politically palatable.

I agree with those who say a test of basic competency might be insulting to the many excellent teachers who long ago passed this minimal threshold. If it were feasible, I would support a waiver provision exempting such teachers, as long as it did not become a massive loophole. But more important than protecting some teachers from a perfunctory exercise, is our obligation to protect students and parents from demonstrably incompetent teachers.

Some critics of the Governor's proposal have argued that testing is at best redundant, since teachers are already evaluated regularly by their supervisors and are dismissed when they are found to be inadequate. Unfortunately, I think we are all well aware of the fact that as a result of state laws and long-standing collective bargaining agreements, teacher dismissals on the basis of performance are extremely difficult, time consuming and rare. In the absence of such job protections, I would agree with those who wish to minimize certification and re-certification requirements. But until that day dawns, the state has an obligation to independently assess the basic competency of the teachers it certifies.

To date the argument against testing is effectively an argument against the plain language of the statute, which links certification to a demonstration of competency. Those opposing the testing of teachers who claim to support the spirit of the law have an obligation to suggest some alternatives. To date, I have heard none. Until viable alternatives can be developed, I believe the spirit of the law demands that we proceed with some form of teacher testing as part of the re-certification process.