



Must Teachers Be Certified to Be Qualified?

by Matthew Brouillette

Summary

Michigan government school teachers must be state-certified, but research shows that certified teachers are not necessarily the most qualified. Rigid certification requirements that keep many good teachers out of public school classrooms should be relaxed.

Body word count: 730

Proposition: The state legislature should relax teacher certification requirements for all schools in Michigan.

“What? We can’t have unqualified teachers in our classrooms!” some will rightly object. *Certification*, however, does not equal *qualification*. In fact, it is increasingly clear that certification deters rather than ensures that the most qualified people are teaching in our classrooms.

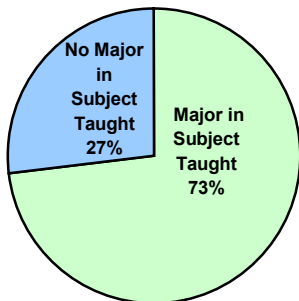
Certification does not guarantee mastery of a subject. According to the U. S. Department of Education, 36 percent of government school teachers—972,000 teachers out of 2.7 million nationwide—did not major or minor in the core subjects they teach.

In Michigan, all government schools must hire state-certified teachers while private religious schools that generally perform quite well are exempt from that mandate. Meanwhile, Sam Peavey, professor emeritus of the School of Education at the University of Illinois, is among many experts who argue that, “After 50 years of research, we have found no significant correlation between the requirements for teacher certification and the quality of student achievement.”

Arizona law allows noncertified teachers in any charter school classroom. Not one of Tempe Preparatory Academy’s 14 full-time faculty is state-certified, yet each member holds a bachelor’s degree and the 10th grade math teacher has a Ph.D., as do two Humane Letters teachers. None of this Arizona charter school’s teachers would be allowed to teach in the traditional government schools. However, the academy’s students score higher than all public schools in the state except one, a magnet school that is allowed to screen enrollment.

Statistics on homeschooled children also demonstrate the weak relationship between certification and academic success. Students who are educated by parents with teaching certificates score in the 88th percentile on a basic battery of tests, while children with noncertified parents score in the 85th percentile—hardly a large enough difference to convincingly prove the superiority of certification. Students taught at home by mothers who *never finished high school* score a full 55

Michigan Teachers with College Majors in Subjects They Teach



Data from 1993-94 school year.

Source: National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future.

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percentile points higher than public school students from families with comparable educational backgrounds.

Sadly, the fastest and easiest way to teach in the classroom is to major in education at college, not specialize in a particular academic discipline. Although certification is ensured by this route, quality teaching is not. An October 1996 report from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy revealed that the curricula in our state university education departments is light on meaningful subject matter for future teachers and heavy on fuzzy, faddish, and politicized material of dubious value.

Many noncertified but otherwise qualified people are barred from the classroom because they lack certification. Mary Alice Buschbacher of Brighton, Michigan, decided two years ago that she wanted to be a special education teacher. After working as a mental health specialist for 17 years, she thought she would be able to use her experience, knowledge, and skills in the classroom. "I was wrong!" she says. "Despite the fact that I presently work as a professional in the field and possess a master's degree in psychiatric mental health nursing, I was told that I would have to go back to school full time for three to five years in order to meet certification requirements."

Unions such as the Michigan Education Association (MEA) lobby to preserve the status quo, claiming it protects the children's best interests. But if Bill Gates from Microsoft could convince a school board that he could teach children, why should the MEA object to him teaching a computer or business class?

The union wants to maintain gatekeeper status to the teaching profession and protect the monopoly on teachers and public education. But if we want the highest quality in the teaching profession—a goal the MEA says it supports—the legislature needs to ease teacher certification requirements and provide alternative methods for qualified teachers to enter the classroom.

Ultimately, the power to ensure quality in teaching lies with local communities and schools, where on-the-job teacher training similar to an apprenticeship would help more than any certification requirement. Principals should be permitted more authority to determine what qualifies a person to teach and, with the assistance of superintendents and school boards, set standards for teachers according to their respective communities and schools.

Second only to parental involvement, teacher quality dramatically affects student academic success. Michigan's government schools need teachers who know their academic subjects. By relaxing certification requirements, Michigan can actually increase the quality and energy of teachers in the profession.

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(Matthew Brouillette, a former junior high and high school history teacher, is managing editor of *Michigan Education Report*, a publication of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Michigan. More information on education is available at www.mackinac.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.)

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