

Alternatives in Education
Schools without teachers -- a hidden scandal
- Kitty Kelly Epstein
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Michelle is a studious college-bound high-school senior who has dutifully enrolled in advanced-placement English and four years of math. But she had a permanent teacher for only one of those years of math. Her first- year algebra, geometry and senior math courses were staffed by one substitute after another.

Michelle's classmate, Eduardo, is a native Spanish speaker. His Spanish class was taught by a temporary teacher who knew no Spanish, and so most of the teaching that semester was done informally and for free by Eduardo himself. Marta, a teacher who has a B.A., speaks Spanish fluently and taught Spanish in her native country, Mexico, took on a Spanish class for 30 days at Eduardo's school as a substitute, but was then removed because she had not yet passed the math section of one of many standardized tests required of new teachers. Marta was later hired by an elite private school attended by some of the wealthiest children in California. The school requires no credentials and did not care if she knew math. They wanted a Spanish teacher who knew Spanish.

Michelle and Eduardo, like many of their high-school peers, come from families whose parents' earnings are among the lowest in California. As part of my research on teacher credentialing, I surveyed and interviewed 50 11th- and 12th- graders at their school. Every student reported multiple years and subjects with no permanent teacher and rotating substitutes who could not teach the assigned subject.

California's Commission on Teacher Credentialing has implemented many rules about who can and cannot be hired as a teacher in California schools, some of them based on the "highly qualified teacher" provision of the misnamed federal law, No Child Left Behind. Because there are nowhere near enough teachers who meet these requirements, thousands of youngsters experience the situation described by Michelle and Eduardo, a sequence of substitutes.

Michelle did have a teacher who actually provided math instruction at the beginning of her first-year algebra course. He had a bachelor's degree and had taken a number of college math courses. He gave effective instruction, but because he was not a college math major, he had only an emergency permit and was removed after 30 days and replaced with a substitute who knew less about math than he did and did not attempt to teach at all. A more rational solution would have left the original teacher in the classroom and required him to take one additional college math course each semester until he completed the equivalent of a college math major.

A similar solution could have been applied to Eduardo's Spanish class; hundreds of Spanish-speaking college graduates live around the high school and one of them could take additional teaching requirements while teaching.

Some conservatives have argued for doing away with teacher-education classes and encouraging people to teach with no preparation, as long as they pass the standardized tests. But those who teach the multilingual, multiclass population of California need more, rather than less, preparation in interactive and interesting teaching methods.

It is the standardized tests themselves that provide the unnecessary barrier; they are expensive, capricious and measure nothing about teaching. An elementary teacher, for example, is now required to take four different standardized exams, in addition to

earning a college degree, taking credential classes and usually working without pay for a year as a student teacher.

The United States has a class- and race-based teacher selection system. The wealthiest send their children to a system of private schools that have none of the bureaucratic requirements imposed on public schools. They hire teachers, such as Marta, based on knowledge of the subject to be taught and willingness to provide nurturing and stimulation to the youngsters in their care. Middle-class public schools are able to hire almost enough credentialed teachers, because more people from those communities are able to break the multiple credential barriers. But many of the poorest schools are condemned to having no teachers, because those who have a college degree and live in these communities are least likely to break the hurdles of multiple expensive tests, unpaid year-long practice teaching, application fees, additional tuition and other requirements.

You may have gone to school in California's heyday, when it compared more favorably with other state systems. You may remember that your teachers had a college degree and some education classes. Period. Additional skills are needed for the current era, but the recently added tests, fees and bureaucratic procedures are too much. A more effective system would permit districts to hire teachers with a bachelor's degree; the ability and willingness to teach; and who enroll in both pedagogy and content classes that would ultimately turn each into a truly excellent teacher.

Are the other bureaucratic procedures not necessary for insuring qualified teachers? Not when they prevent tens of thousands of students, like Michelle and Eduardo, from having any teachers at all.

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