

Questions and Answers about Teacher Quality for Teachers

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001—the newly reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—has been getting a lot of attention lately from teachers, school administrators, and the media. This law requires teachers who teach core academic subjects to be “highly qualified.” The law defines a highly qualified teacher as an individual who:

- Has obtained full state certification (including alternative certification) or has passed the state teacher licensing exam;

AND

- Holds a license to teach in the state;
- And has not had certification or licensure requirements waived on an emergency, temporary, or provisional basis.

In addition, there are requirements for demonstrating subject matter knowledge that differ depending on whether you are an elementary, middle, or high school teacher, and whether you’re a teacher new to the profession or a veteran teacher. Because of the new requirements in the federal law, many states are re-examining and revising their certification and licensure systems.

The AFT has prepared this series of question and answers to help teachers apply the new requirements to their own situation and to understand any necessary steps they should take to comply with the law.

Q1: How do I know if the new law applies to me?

A1: States are in the process of incorporating the new federal requirements into their teacher certification and licensure systems. In some states, the existing certification and licensure requirements meet the federal requirements. However, in other states, changes to the certification and licensure system will be necessary, and you may be required to fulfill additional requirements to show that you are “highly qualified” as defined by the law. The requirements will depend on whether you are an elementary, middle, or high school teacher, and whether you’re a teacher new to the profession or a veteran teacher. It’s a good idea to check with your union for more information.

Q2: What does it mean to be a teacher who is “new to the profession”?

A2: The federal law does not provide a definition for a teacher who is “new to the profession”. Your state will define this term so that you will know how to fulfill the new federal requirements.

Q3: What is the timeframe for all of this? When do these requirements go into effect?

A3: All teachers of “core academic subjects” hired after the first day of the 2002-03 school year who teach in a program supported by Title I funds must be highly qualified. By the end of the 2005-06 school year, all teachers of core academic subjects must be highly qualified.

Q4: What does it mean to be a teacher teaching in a program “supported by Title I funds”?

A4: Teachers teaching in a program supported by Title I funds are teachers: (1) in targeted assistance schools paid with Title I Part A funds; (2) in Title I schoolwide program schools; and (3) employed by districts to provide Title I services to eligible private school students.

Q5: What are the “core academic subjects”?

A5: The core academic subjects are English, reading, language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics, government, economics, arts, history, and geography. Therefore, if you are a teacher teaching one of these core subjects, the new federal law applies to you. If you are a special education teacher, see Q8. If you teach English Language Learners, see Q9.

Q6: Are art and/or music considered “core academic subjects”?

A6: The law includes “the arts” as a core academic subject, but does not provide a definition. Your state will determine its definition of “the arts.”

Q7: I’m a vocational education teacher. Do I have to meet the “highly qualified” definition?

A7: Only if you teach a core academic subject. For example, if a vocational education teacher only teaches a trade, such as auto mechanics, she would not need to meet the highly qualified teacher requirements, because auto mechanics is not a core academic subject.

Q8: I’m a special education teacher. Does this law apply to me?

A8: The U.S. Department of Education has indicated through its comments on Title I regulations that special education teachers who are providing instruction in core academic subjects must meet the “highly qualified” definition in all subjects they teach.

On the other hand, special educators who do not directly instruct students on any core academic subject or who only provide consultation to highly qualified teachers of core academic subjects in adapting curricula, using behavioral supports and interventions, and

selecting appropriate accommodations do not need to meet the same “highly qualified” subject-matter competency requirements that apply under NCLB to teachers of core academic subjects.

Q9: I teach English Language Learners (ELLs). Do I have to meet the highly qualified definition? If my program is funded by Title III, do I have to meet additional requirements?

A9: The U.S. Department of Education has indicated through its comments on Title I regulations that ELL teachers must meet the “highly qualified” definition in all subjects they teach. In addition, if you teach in a program funded by Title III, you must be fluent in English and any other language used for instruction, including having written and oral communication skills.

Q10: I’m a new teacher. How do I know if I meet the new highly qualified definition?

A10: To meet the definition, teachers who are new to the profession must hold at least a bachelor’s degree and demonstrate a high level of subject matter competence.

- *Elementary school teachers* who are new to the profession must demonstrate subject knowledge and teaching skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and other areas of the basic elementary school curriculum by passing a rigorous test. Your state certification or licensure test may count toward meeting this requirement.
- *Middle and high school teachers* who are new to the profession must demonstrate a high level of competency in each of the academic subjects they teach by passing a subject matter test in each subject OR by successfully completing an academic major, a graduate degree, coursework equivalent to an undergraduate major, or advanced certification or credentialing. Again, your state certification or licensure test may count toward meeting this requirement.

Q11: I’ve been teaching for years. What steps do I need to take to make sure I meet the “highly qualified” definition?

A11: Veteran teachers are required to hold at least a bachelor’s degree and be licensed by the state. They must also either meet the requirements for teachers new to the profession (see Q10) or demonstrate competence in each academic subject they teach based on a “high, objective uniform state standard of evaluation.” Each state will determine what this evaluation option will look like. States could use peer observations, documentation of work such as a portfolio, a professional development plan or some combination of the three. Check with your local union president, district office, or state department of education to find out the evaluation option being offered in your state.

Q12: What is the “high, objective, uniform, state standard of evaluation”?

A12: The law identifies seven characteristics of a teacher evaluation system that meets the definition of a high, objective, uniform, state standard of evaluation. Such a system::

- Is set by the State for both grade appropriate academic subject matter knowledge and teaching skills;
- Is aligned with challenging State academic content and student academic achievement standards and developed in consultation with core content specialists, teachers, principals, and school administrators;
- Provides objective, coherent information about the teacher's attainment of core content knowledge in the academic subjects in which a teacher teaches;
- Is applied uniformly to all teachers in the same academic subject and the same grade level throughout the State;
- Takes into consideration, but is not based primarily on, the time the teacher has been teaching in the academic subject;
- Is made available to the public upon request; and
- May involve multiple, objective measures of teacher competency.

Each state will determine what the high, objective, state standard of evaluation will look like. Check with your union, district office, or state department of education to find out more information.

Q13: I am a veteran middle school teacher. I passed the state generalist exam in math, science, English, and social studies, but was not required by the state to take separate subject-matter tests. Am I “highly qualified”?

A13: No, unless you also have one of the following for each of the subjects you teach:

- An academic major;
- A graduate degree;
- Coursework equivalent to an undergraduate academic major; OR
- Advanced certification or credentialing.

If you don't have one of these credentials, you must either pass a rigorous state subject test in each of the academic subjects you teach, or demonstrate subject matter competence based on a “high, objective, uniform, state standard of evaluation” (see Q12). The state department of education will determine how you may meet this requirement. Check with your local union president, district office, or the state department of education.

Q14: I am a veteran middle school teacher who is fully licensed, with a B.A. and an academic minor in the subject area I teach. Am I highly qualified?

A14: No, having an academic minor does not make you highly qualified. See the answer to the previous question to find out what steps you need to take.

Q15: I teach seventh grade in a school that has been designated by the state as a K-8 school. Do I have to meet the highly qualified requirements for elementary school teachers or for middle school teachers?

A15: Since the state has designated your school as an elementary school, then you must meet the requirements for elementary school teachers. However, if the upper elementary grades in your school have been designated as a middle school, per the “school-within-a-school” concept, then you must meet the requirements for middle school teachers.

Q16: I am a middle school teacher who is new to the profession. I passed the state generalist exam in math, science, English, and social studies, but was not required by the state to take a subject exam. I don’t have an academic subject major. Am I “highly qualified”?

A16: No, unless you also have one of the following for each of the subjects you teach:

- An academic major;
- A graduate degree;
- Coursework equivalent to an undergraduate academic major; OR
- Advanced certification or credentialing.

If you don’t have one of these credentials, you must pass a rigorous state subject test in each of the academic subjects you teach. The state department of education will determine how you may meet this requirement. Check with your local union president, district office, or the state department of education.

Q17: I am participating in an alternative route to certification program. How do the federal requirements apply to me?

A17: To be “highly qualified”, you must have a four-year college degree, have demonstrated subject matter competence, and be enrolled in an alternative route program that includes the following four provisions:

- includes high-quality professional development that is sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused;
- requires intensive supervision consisting of structured guidance and regular ongoing support or teacher mentoring;
- allows you to assume the functions of a teacher for not more than three years; and
- requires that you demonstrate satisfactory progress towards full certification as prescribed by the state.

It is up to your state department of education to determine if your alternate route program meets these provisions.

Q18: What is high-quality professional development?

A18: The federal law includes a detailed description of high-quality professional development. States and districts must ensure that the professional development offered to all teachers, including teachers in an alternate route program, meets this definition.

Q19: I'm teaching on an emergency credential. What do I need to do to keep my job?

A19: You need to take steps to become fully certified and meet the new requirements of the law. The specifics of what you are required to do and when you need to do it depend on the subject you are teaching, how long you have been teaching, and whether or not you teach in a Title I school. Please read through the previous questions to find out the specific steps you need to take.

Q20: If I'm not "highly qualified" under this law and need additional training, are there resources available that I can access?

A20: Yes. The federal government has provided professional development funds to states and districts to help teachers become highly qualified through Title I and Title II. Check with your local union president, principal, or district office to find out what funds are available at your school.

Q21: What is the AFT's position on defining highly qualified teachers?

A21: For years, the AFT has advocated that every child should be taught by a highly qualified teacher, with no exceptions. The "highly qualified" teacher provisions in No Child Left Behind are the first steps in ensuring all public school children have access to a high-quality education.

Teachers who are new to the profession should pass rigorous subject tests and complete an accredited, researched-based, comprehensive preparation program. Moreover, they should receive ongoing support through an effective mentoring program.

Conversely, veteran teachers should be able to demonstrate that they are highly qualified in a number of ways. Although veteran teachers have the option of taking subject matter tests, the AFT believes there are better ways to determine if a veteran teacher is highly qualified, which may include peer observations, documentation of work such as a portfolio, or a combination of both. Asking veteran teachers to take subject matter tests ignores the fact that successful teachers know more than content--they know how children learn and are able to link the two.