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State Reporting on Teacher-Training Programs Is a Work in Progress

BY JULIANNE BASINGER

FOR THE FIRST TIME, states have filed federally mandated reports on the quality of their teacher-education programs with the U.S. Education Department. Despite early resistance from higher-education institutions and serious flaws in the reports' design, the lawmakers who championed the measure say it marks a step toward accountability.

The reports, which were required by Congress as part of the 1998 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, provide a patchwork picture of teacher education across the nation. The law's sponsors acknowledge that the mandate needs reworking.

"We clearly need to revisit the whole thing," said Sen. Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico, a Democrat who helped write the legislation. "We were making a first run at trying to ensure a greater accountability on the part of states with regard to their schools of education, and to have that information made available to the public. It's been a partially successful effort."

A MIXED RESPONSE

Because requirements for prospective teachers vary in each state, some states struggled to gather the data to meet the October reporting deadline, and a few failed to submit all the required information, to the chagrin of the law's sponsors.

Other states, however, noted that the law had spurred them to gather data that they had not previously considered and to beef up provisions for assessing whether their teacher-preparation programs were adequate.

"We are disappointed that several states have failed to provide the information requested by Congress, despite having been given ample time and assistance," said Rep. George Miller of California, another Democrat who helped write the legislation. Still, he added, the reports show "progress in ensuring better accountability for teacher-preparation programs."

The law called for states to rank colleges according to the percentage of their teacher-education students who pass certification exams, to describe state standards, and to identify those teacher-training programs considered "low performing."

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The state reports were released by the Education Department late last month. The law requires the department to analyze the state data and report on it to Congress in April.

A *Chronicle* analysis of the state data last week showed that 15 colleges in six states had programs classified as "low performing" or "at risk." Some states said that they had not previously had provisions for such evaluations, and that they created them to meet the Congressional mandate. Those states noted that they will give colleges

several years to meet the new requirements before enforcing them.

Among the states that did have such provisions, each had its own definition of "low performing." In states that had established partnerships with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, the designation sometimes was given to colleges on probation with the accreditor.

In Mississippi, such was the case with Jackson State University. Other programs classified as "low performing" or "at risk" were: Central Methodist College, Missouri Valley College, and the University of Missouri at Saint Louis, in Missouri; Boricua College, the York College campus of the City University of New York, and Long Island University at Brooklyn, in New York; Shaw University, in North Carolina; Central State University, Denison University, Heidelberg College, Lake Erie College, Notre Dame College, and Urbana University, all in Ohio; and the University of Wyoming.

UNCERTIFIED TEACHERS

The reports also reinforced data from earlier studies on teacher standards and certification that had been conducted by private research groups. Nearly all the states said they had academic standards for schoolchildren, and 45 states reported having standards that prospective teachers must meet to attain initial teacher certification. All but nine states said they planned to align the standards for teachers and for schoolchildren, or already had done so.

The state reports reflected the problem, particularly in urban ar-

reas, of school districts hiring teachers who aren't fully certified. Nationwide, about 6 percent of schoolteachers lack those credentials, and about a third of those teach in high-poverty districts. In Arizona, California, Louisiana, and North Carolina, at least 15 percent of teachers lack certification. In Georgia, New Mexico, New York, and Texas, about 10 percent are uncertified. Many teachers also were assigned to classes in academic subjects for which they lacked training or certification.

Several states, however, did not even have the data on the number

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of teachers who lacked certification. Some states, such as Alabama, do not define out-of-field teaching in the same way that the federal law does, which forced officials to scramble to gather the data before the deadline.

"It seemed as though there was a perception that the states are more similar than they are," said Jayne A. Meyer, Alabama's director of teacher education and certification. "So many of the definitions and terms that were used did not match what we do."

The requirement that colleges be ranked by the number of their stu-

dents who pass certification exams turned out to be even more of a fiasco. In 10 states, students must pass the tests to graduate, so the pass rates for those colleges were 100 percent. Another nine states don't test teachers for initial licensure. In the remaining states, most of the pass rates were at least 90 percent.

Some education scholars say those uniformly high pass rates point to a lack of rigor in the licensing exams. A 1999 study by the Education Trust, a Washington research and lobbying group, found that most states rely on low-level tests that could easily be passed by advanced high-school students.

'MEANINGLESSNESS'

The federally mandated rankings of colleges therefore don't really show the differences between effective teacher-preparation programs and poor ones, says Edward M. Elmendorf, vice president for government relations and policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. "I'd like to see them eliminate the meaninglessness of the rankings," he said.

Mr. Bingaman said last week that he and others in Congress planned to amend the law during the next revision of the Higher Education Act, in two years. "There is no doubt that there's more work to be done," he said. "But I think having a focus on requiring states to measure how well schools of education are doing is very useful. We just may not have found all the right measurements yet."

The state reports may be read on the Internet (www.title2.org).