

The Gathering Storm: Teacher Testing and Black Teachers

The push for higher standards in teaching certification threatens the survival of black teachers in southern states.

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Imagine this academic weather forecast: A storm forming in the southern states, which the weather bureau has named "Teacher Testing," is expected to spread rapidly across the country. Such storms have a history of damaging disproportionately the crop of future black teachers. Black applicants for teacher certification are cautioned to prepare adequately for survival.

The public's concern about the preparation of teachers and the quality of the nation's schools has brought about a rapid spread of teacher competency assessment programs. Currently, 36 states test teacher competence in some way; 28 states test or plan to test prior to certification; 21 states test or plan to test applicants for admission to teacher education.

Much of the controversy surrounding such testing has occurred in the southern half of the United States. In 1961, as it became apparent that schools in Florida were becoming increasingly desegregated and that black teachers would be added to previously all-white school faculties, the legislature passed a bill requiring all teachers to score at least 500 on the National Teachers Examination (NTE) in order to be certified. Scores of 600 or more were required for master teacher or administrative positions in some counties, and teachers failing to make the minimum score were frequently paid less than other teachers.

That the National Teachers Examination was a political issue soon became

apparent. Almost from the beginning, both black and white teachers were opposed to it. "Many blacks did not see the test as a measure designed to improve the quality of teaching, but rather as a punitive device designed to eliminate a large number of them from the teaching profession" (Porter and Neyland, 1977, p. 147).

Concerted efforts to repeal the requirements were begun by the Florida Education Association, the Florida State Teachers Association, and their district and local groups, with the support of the National Education Association. Finally, in 1968, the law requiring the test was repealed.

In the 1970s, misuse of the National Teachers Examination came under fire in North and South Carolina. In both states, affiliates of the National Education Association criticized use of the NTE to classify and determine salaries for experienced teachers. But in both states the Supreme Court ruled that, even though fewer blacks attained the minimum scores for certification, use of the test was proper because there was no evidence of intentional discrimination.

Louisiana's Acts of 1977 marked the beginning of a state-level teacher testing movement that has spread to other southern states. Louisiana prescribed that applicants for certification pass an

examination that includes English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge in the teacher's area of specialization. In 1978, Florida and Georgia began to develop similar programs. Alabama, Arizona, Kansas, Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Tennessee followed suit in 1979. Five more states were added to the list in 1980, and six more in 1981.

Test Performance of Blacks

These teacher testing programs are leading to a severe reduction in black teachers from the nation's classrooms. Education officials in Georgia, Louisiana, Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi report that whites perform significantly better than blacks. In Georgia, for example, slightly more than 85 percent of the whites taking the exam pass the first time, compared with less than 40 percent for blacks. (At the predominantly white University of Georgia, however, 70 percent of the school's blacks who took the certification exam in 1981 passed.)

In Louisiana in the last few years, 70 to 73 percent of the students from predominantly white public colleges passed the certification test, while 10 percent of the graduates of predominantly black institutions succeeded the first time. Students from private Louisiana colleges that enroll more blacks than whites tend to do better. Their success rate is between 26 and 60 percent—but still significantly below the success rate for students from predominantly white private institutions in the state.

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During six administrations of the Florida Teacher Certification Examination, the passing rate for whites has ranged from 80 to 90 percent, compared to a range of from 32 to 37 percent for blacks. While Alabama and Mississippi education officials have no breakdown on the success rates on the teacher certification examination, they confirm that the trend is the same in their states.

Why Do Blacks Fail?

Explanations vary as to why so many blacks fail certification tests. One explanation is that students tend to do more poorly on tests if they come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. While the theory holds true for both whites and blacks, it is particularly applicable to blacks because such a high percentage of them come from poor families. A second explanation is that blacks constitute a subculture of mainstream white

America, and schools do not take into account their special needs. A third position holds that the disparity in test scores will not be erased until the last lingering effects of the South's segregated public school system disappear. Others say that, compared to whites, blacks lack strong preparation in elementary and secondary education programs, or that blacks do not receive adequate instruction in the basic skills before they reach college. Some say the tests are biased tools of a white elite bent on keeping blacks out of the classroom.

Whatever the reason, the high failure rate of prospective black teachers on teacher tests in the southern states raises questions about the survival of future black public school teachers. More is at stake here than job protection for black teachers. The challenge is to change the quality of education for all Americans.

To operate a public school system without black teachers is to teach white

supremacy without saying a word. If racism excludes black teachers from schools, no American can have a quality education, since only a racist system would tolerate the inequality that stifles the talents of any group of Americans.

For many blacks, teacher testing is, as a Florida headline put it, an “academic electric chair” that could quickly make black teachers a vanishing breed. □

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