Teacher Testing in Dallas

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The Dallas Independent School District's teacher selection system screens new teacher applicants because with an annual teacher turnover of approximately 400-500 teachers out of a 7,000 teacher workforce, we think there can be significant improvement without the problems inherent in testing established teachers.

We chose 11 criteria for assessing applicants' qualifications. Eight of these criteria were standard and relatively nonquantitative. They included an analysis of the teacher application form for completeness and evidence of literacy; state certification; an analysis of all available college transcripts; an evaluation by principals based on preemployment interviews; an evaluation by the cooperating teacher with whom the teaching candidate practice-taught; an evaluation by the college personnel who supervised the candidate's practice-teaching; an analysis of the candidate's personal and professional references; and a recommendation by a tri-ethnic screening committee made after analysis of the other criteria.

Three quantitative criteria were added: (1) a formally scored interview; (2) an essay exercise requiring each teacher applicant to write two ten-minute responses, one on a theoretical or philosophical topic chosen from among six such topics and another on a description of a module of instruction within the applicant's subject-area expertise; and (3) a test of verbal and quantitative ability.

We adopted for trial use the Wesman Personnel Classification Test, which is a 28-minute test of verbal and quantitative ability. It was not designed to be a teacher examination; it makes no pretense of testing the substantive knowledge presumed necessary for good teaching. Nor was it designed to identify, by means of high scores, persons who would make excellent teachers. We assumed, however, that persons who scored very low on the WPCT would encounter more-than-average difficulty in a profession that depends to such a great extent on one's ability to communicate. In short, it seemed logical that successful teachers should be minimally competent in acquiring, remembering, and transmitting knowledge.

Elaborate studies were designed to test that assumption and to validate the entire system. Dallas teacher organizations didn't attempt to prevent the pilot testing, but the press came close to destroying the effort. As part of the validation of the WPCT, we tested approximately 500 first-year teachers. The press forced the premature release of these data through the application of the open records law and promptly announced that 50 percent of Dallas teachers scored below average. They were compared to everything from preparatory school students to clerical personnel. Never once was it mentioned that the teachers who took the National Teacher Examinations (NTE) scored, as a group, above the national mean on the NTE.

Now, three years later, the teacher selection system is still functioning and has been, to a large extent, validated. Information on the validation of the system can be obtained through the Dallas Independent School District's Department of Research and Evaluation.

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