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There's no simple cause – or fix – for the education crisis

JILL VAN GLUBT

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As the state policy board working to ensure that every child in Washington state is taught by a highly capable teacher, the Professional Educator Standards Board understands the concerns about our state's critical need for math and science teachers expressed by Liv Finne of the Washington Policy Center (Viewpoint, 7-22).

Unfortunately, her statements about how to address this situation misinterpret research, state law and current practices, and oversimplify the challenges we face.

A high degree of knowledge in math and science is necessary for effective teaching, but not sufficient. Just knowing a tremendous amount about a subject does not mean you can teach it to a classroom of 14-year-olds.

Teaching credentials that reflect attainment of both subject knowledge and teaching skills do, and must, matter. The purpose of a license is to assure the public that the holder has achieved an expected level of competency. After all, we are entrusting our children to that person's care. Not only do we know that parents want licensed and qualified teachers, we know from research that it does make a difference.

Finne states that "teachers without credentials, such as Teach for America candidates, are just as effective." But studies on TFA graduate effectiveness haven't addressed the impact of credentialing and, in one, more TFA graduates held certification in the subject they were teaching than non-TFA.

TFA has an impressive track record of high-caliber recruits that achieve positive student learning results. However, very few teachers in TFA stay beyond their two-year commitment.

Contrary to Finne's assertion, the Washington Association of School Administrators has stated it does not feel that current state certification requirements hamper a district's recruitment and hiring efforts. It is not correct that state law restricts districts from hiring experienced math and science professionals.

It does demand, however, that these individuals immediately begin training in effective instruction, classroom management and other important competencies, toward gaining their full teaching credential.

Finne suggests that by law, Bill Gates is not allowed to teach math in a public school. But Gates himself, in his address to Congress in March, critiqued the practice of providing difficult-to-staff schools with less experienced teachers, stating that "our highest-need

students too often help provide on-the-job training for novice teachers – exacerbating the achievement gap.”

While Finne’s assertion that hiring restrictions are responsible for students failing the WASL is unsubstantiated, we agree that secondary teachers need to know far more math. Actually, not just secondary but all teachers. This is why, with the support of the state Legislature, the PESB this past year adopted new knowledge and skill standards in all subject areas, including math and science, for elementary, middle and high school teachers.

Developed by experts in the field and from higher education institutions, these standards now contain the rigor necessary for teachers in middle level to instruct through Algebra II and secondary teachers to instruct through calculus.

Finne also cited incorrect statistics about the state-funded Alternative Routes program. Among the four routes within this program, one is specifically designed to allow school districts to hire math and science professionals under a temporary teaching credential while they complete a mentored internship that results in state certification. Each intern receives a salary and an \$8,000 scholarship to cover program costs.

But no legislation, nor any program alone, as Finne asserts, can “attract sufficient numbers of teachers to meet current shortages.” The shortage of math and science teachers could worsen in coming years. The data indicate that we will not be able to hire our way out of this dilemma. We will also have to retool the existing workforce and do a better job of retaining the teachers we have.

Washington must develop aggressive recruitment strategies and greater access to a wider variety of training options. More should be done to tap math and science majors, but given the tremendous demand, we must also produce more of them.

The PESB – composed of accomplished educators – lives within the system it oversees. We empathize with the gravity of the problem, but we also appreciate the complexity of the solutions. Though it will be difficult, together we can succeed.

Our teachers and our students depend on it.

Jill Van Glubt is chairwoman of the Washington Professional Educator Standards Board.

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Revise teacher law to hire math, science professionals

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While the world changes at breakneck speed and our needs for a skilled work force continue to increase, our public education system remains stuck in the past. In an effort to modernize the school curriculum, the State Board of Education will soon vote on a plan, known as CORE 24, to require students to take more classes in math, science, English and other subjects before they graduate.

Current law requires students to fulfill only 19 credits to graduate. These 19 credits do not prepare students to apply for college or to follow a vocational career. However, education officials say our system is not ready for such a change, because we already face shortages of teachers in math and science.

Education officials have a point. They are hampered by laws which sabotage efforts at reform.

Antiquated teacher-credential laws prevent schools from hiring individuals working in the private sector who have a high degree of knowledge and expertise in math and science. For example, by law Bill Gates is not allowed to teach math in a public high school.

Teacher-certification laws also contribute to an education culture which equates quality to the holding of a credential, even though research shows that teachers without such credentials, such as Teach for America candidates, are just as effective, if not more so, at raising student achievement as teachers with certificates, particularly in math.

Washington has a rich resource of talent which should be tapped for our classrooms. More than 240,000 people in this state have bachelor's degrees or higher as computer or mathematical scientists, architects or engineers, statisticians and accountants, computer and information systems and engineering managers, life and physical scientists and post-secondary professors in math or science.

Over the past 10 years, public and private colleges and universities in Washington state graduated 26,693 individuals who earned a bachelor's degree or higher in math or closely related subject. Yet none of these talented professionals can be hired as a teacher without a state-approved certificate.

In 2001, the Legislature – reacting to shortages of teachers of math and science – attempted to create alternate routes to the classroom. Alternate Route 3 was intended to attract “career changers” with five years work experience and a bachelor's degree or better in math.

Unfortunately, this “alternate route” requires candidates to go a year without pay, take 45 credits and pay more than \$10,000 in tuition. The program has failed to attract sufficient numbers of teachers to meet current shortages.

Shortages of teachers of math persist. School officials are forced to lower standards for teachers of math. Only 40 percent of Washington’s middle and high school teachers of math either majored or minored in math in college. The rest of our math teachers only have a math “endorsement,” which requires considerably less math knowledge.

The research shows that the higher the grade, the more a teacher needs to know in order to be effective in raising student achievement. The state’s artificial restrictions on hiring new teachers has resulted in large numbers of students failing the math WASL and having to take remedial math in college.

In addition, this year the Legislature and governor repealed the WASL graduation requirement in math.

The world that our children live in is dramatically different from the past. In 1950, 60 percent of all jobs were unskilled and required a high school education or less. Today, fewer than 15 percent of all jobs are considered unskilled and roughly two-thirds of all jobs require some level of college education. Knowledge of math and science is critical to the futures of many of our children.

Updating the curriculum through CORE 24 is clearly necessary to prepare our students for the global marketplace. Our students desperately need to benefit from individuals currently working in the private sector who might be attracted to our classrooms, if only the main obstacle to entry – teacher-certification laws – can be removed.

School officials need the freedom to hire any skilled professional with a bachelor’s degree in math or closely related subject, and to create on-the-job training programs supported by mentor teachers.

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