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The Opinion Pages | EDITORIAL

Help Teachers Before They Get to Class

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD OCT. 14, 2016

The countries that have eclipsed the United States in educational achievement have far more effective systems for training teachers. Consider, for example, Finland's system, which has consistently ranked among the best in the world. Decades ago, Finland moved teacher education out of teachers colleges and into universities, where students are given rigorous preparation and recruited from the top quarter of their graduating high school classes.

Teachers colleges in the United States have resisted proposals for raising entry standards along these lines, which is unfortunate given how abysmal teacher training is in this country compared with training in high-performing nations. The problem was underscored in a 2013 study by the National Council on Teacher Quality that rated only 10 percent of the 1,200 programs the study examined as adequate. Most programs had low or no standards for admissions.

Even when they offer adequate instruction, the programs fail in other ways. For example, they regularly train people in subject areas where no new teachers are needed, while ignoring areas where there is a teacher shortage, like math, science and special education. Beyond that, schools often fail to arrange for student-teaching programs in schools in high-poverty areas, which puts those schools at a disadvantage for finding new staff members.

This week, the Department of Education released rules that are meant to address these problems and help states distinguish strong teacher-training programs from weak ones.

Under the new rules, states are required to gather information on new teachers, including the programs that trained them, and to get feedback from both principals and teachers on how well the training programs prepared them. States must then report this information to the department and make it available to the public.

Most important, the states will rate teacher-training programs on multiple indexes, including how teachers fare on evaluations or growth in student learning, as measured through a method determined by the state. As part of this process, states are required to ensure that all teaching programs give students a strong grounding in the subject they will teach — as well as in how to teach it. States are also expected to help low-performing programs get better.

In addition to giving the states a clearer view of how well teacher-training programs are working, the new information will allow aspiring teachers to evaluate the worth of teacher training programs before they go into debt to complete them.

The new rules represent a necessary first step in broader reforms of teacher preparation. Eventually, for example, schools of education will have to become more rigorous and selective if the country is to get the caliber of teaching that it clearly needs.

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