

Failing to Teach in High School

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The national math and reading scores that were released last week came at just the right time for Congress, which is about to reauthorize the Higher Education Act and talking yet again about the neglected but crucial issue of how to improve teachers' training. The message of the new scores is that education reform will fail unless the country gets enough qualified teachers to staff the middle and high schools, which have been stubbornly resistant to the reforms that are clearly taking hold in the early grades.

The new math and reading scores, from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, show impressive gains in elementary schools, where the achievement gap between minority children and their higher-achieving white peers has narrowed considerably. But the news is worse in the upper grades. In a pattern that echoes state and local results, student performance nationally drops off sharply in middle school and comes to a standstill in high school.

A shortage of qualified teachers in the upper grades - where schools need to offer specialized instruction in math, science and other areas - is taking a toll. School systems have typically reacted to the shortage of teachers by placing their most well-trained and experienced teachers in the early grades, a strategy that means the teachers become less and less qualified over all as the students move up the grades. This accounts, at least in part, for the constant flow of data that shows poor and diminished performance in middle schools and high schools.

Congress has tried to address this issue in the past, but it has yet to find an effective way to improve the teacher supply. The Higher Education Act presents an excellent opportunity to give the states help and direction in this area.

At the very least, both the federal government and the states need better data systems to keep track of how many teachers are being trained in various areas. The states must also bite the bullet and finally close any colleges of education that are no more than diploma mills. What the scores show is that education reform will depend on having skilled teachers at every level, throughout the system.