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The Problem of Underqualified Teachers in American Secondary Schools

by [Richard M. Ingersoll](#)

This article presents the results of a research project on the phenomenon of out-of-field teaching in American high schools--teachers teaching subjects for which they have little education or training. Over the past couple of years, the problem of out-of-field teaching has become a prominent topic in the realm of educational policy and reform, and the results of this research have been widely reported and commented on both by education policymakers and the national media. But unfortunately, out-of-field teaching is a problem that remains largely misunderstood. My research utilizes nationally representative data from the Schools and Staffing Survey, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics. The purpose of this article is to summarize what my research has revealed about out-of-field teaching: how much of it goes on; to what extent it varies across different subjects, across different kinds of schools, and across different kinds of classrooms; and finally, the reasons for its prevalence in American schools. The data show that even using a minimal standard for qualified teachers--those holding a college minor in the fields in which they teach--the numbers of out-of-field teachers are striking. For example, a third of all secondary school teachers of mathematics have neither a major nor a minor in mathematics. My analyses have also shown that out-of-field teaching greatly varies across schools, teachers, and classrooms. The crucial question, however, and the source of great misunderstanding is why so many teachers are teaching subjects for which they have little background. I examine three widely believed explanations of out-of-field teaching--that out-of-field teaching is a result of either inadequate training on the part of teachers, inflexible teacher unions, or shortages of qualified teachers. My analysis shows that each of these views is seriously flawed. The article closes by offering an alternative explanation for out-of-field teaching--one focused on the organizational structure of schools and the occupational conditions and characteristics of teaching.

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Few educational problems have received more attention in recent times than the failure to ensure that our nation's elementary and secondary classrooms are all staffed with qualified teachers. Over the past decade, dozens of studies, commissions, and national reports have bemoaned the qualifications and

quality of our teachers. As a result, reformers in many states have pushed tougher teacher education and certification standards. Moreover, a whole host of initiatives and programs have sprung up that are designed to recruit new and talented candidates into teaching. Among these are programs designed to entice professionals into mid-career changes to teaching; alternative certification programs, whereby college graduates can postpone formal education training, obtain an emergency teaching certificate, and begin teaching immediately; and Peace Corpslike programs, such as Teach for America, which are designed to lure the "best and brightest" into understaffed schools. President Clinton has also joined the action: A key goal of the president's 10-point educational "Call to Action" is to ensure that our nation's elementary and secondary students are all taught by "talented and trained teachers." To this end, Clinton has, for example, proposed a major initiative to recruit and train thousands of new teachers to serve in low-income schools.

Concern with the quality and qualifications of teachers is neither unique nor surprising. Elementary and secondary schooling are mandatory in the U.S., and it is into the custody of teachers that children are legally placed for a significant portion of their lives. The quality of teachers and teaching is undoubtedly one of the most important factors shaping the learning and growth of students. Moreover, the largest single component of the cost of education in any country is teacher compensation.

However, although ensuring that our nation's classrooms are all staffed with qualified teachers is a perennially important issue in our schools, it is also among the least understood. Like many similarly worthwhile reforms, the array of recent efforts alone will not solve the problems of underqualified teachers and poor quality teaching in this country because they do not address some of their key causes.

One of the least recognized of these causes is the phenomenon known as out-of-field teaching--teachers assigned to teach subjects for which they have little training or education. Educators have, of course, long been aware of the existence of out-of-field teaching. James Conant called attention to the widespread "misuse of teachers" through out-of-field assignments in his landmark 1963 study *The Education of American Teachers*. Albert Shanker condemned out-of-field teaching as education's "dirty little secret" in a 1985 opinion piece in the *New York Times*. But an absence of accurate statistics on out-of-field teaching has kept this problem largely unrecognized, a situation remedied with the release, beginning in the early 1990s, of the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), a major new survey of the nation's elementary and secondary teachers conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education.¹ Over the past five years, I have undertaken a research project that used this survey to determine how much out-of-field teaching goes on in this country and why.²

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