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## Why So Many Underqualified High School Teachers?

By [Richard M. Ingersoll](#)

Commentary

Read our story, ["Investing in Teaching,"](#) May 27, 1998.

["National Teaching Commission Launches Counterattack,"](#) April 8, 1998.

["Students' Fortunes Rest With Assigned Teacher,"](#) Feb. 18, 1998.

["Bad News About Bad Teaching,"](#) Feb. 5, 1998.

As a former high school history teacher, I always wince when I come across yet another assessment offering compelling evidence of how little American students know of our nation's history. Among the most disturbing of these has been the performance of students in U.S. history on the "nation's report card"--the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In recent years, the portion of high school seniors who do well on the NAEP history exams has been lower than in any other subject. For example, in the 1994 history exam, only one-tenth of seniors scored at an "acceptable" level, and over half could not show even partial knowledge of basic historical facts.

Very few critics have recognized one important reason why our students don't know much about history: the phenomenon known as out-of-field teaching.

Typically, explanations of why students know so little about history focus on the content and rigor of social studies courses and high school graduation requirements. As a result, social studies textbooks, curricula, standards, and requirements have all been under intense scrutiny and revision in recent years. Very few critics, however, have recognized another important reason why our students don't know much about history: the phenomenon known as out-of-field teaching--teachers assigned to teach subjects for which they have little background training or education.

Educators have, of course, always been aware of the existence of out-of-field teaching, but an absence of accurate statistics on the problem has kept it largely unrecognized and long one of education's "dirty little secrets." This situation was remedied with the release, beginning in the early 1990s, of the Schools and Staffing Survey, a major new survey of the nation's elementary and secondary teachers conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education. 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.

I found, for instance, that about a fifth of all secondary-level social studies teachers in the United States do not have at least a minor in any social science, or in history, or in social studies education. When I focused on history alone, I found an even worse situation--53 percent of secondary-level history teachers are without a major or a minor in

Commentary: "[The Real Teacher Crisis](#)," Oct. 27, 1997.

history itself. Comparable levels are found in the other core academic subjects; for example, a third of math teachers do not have at least a minor in math or math education.

Some people have expressed skepticism at these figures. Surely, they argue, things could not be *that* bad. Indeed, there is some merit to this skepticism. There is no doubt that some of these out-of-field teachers may actually be qualified, despite not having a minor or major in the subject. Some may be qualified by virtue of knowledge gained through previous jobs, through life experiences, or through informal training. Others may have completed substantial college coursework in a field, but not have gotten a major or minor.

But, my premise was that even a moderate number of teachers lacking the minimal prerequisite of a college minor signals the existence of serious problems in our schools. Just because someone has a major or minor does not, of course, guarantee they will be a quality teacher, nor even a qualified teacher. My assumption was that having a college minor is, however, a necessary prerequisite. In short, I assumed that few parents would expect their teenagers to be taught, for example, 11th grade world history by a teacher who did not have at least a minor in history or something related, such as social studies or one of the social sciences.

That is, however, precisely the case for well over 2 million secondary-level social studies students every year. Whether I examined teachers without a major or minor, or teachers without certification, the numbers were similarly alarming. I found, for example, that about a quarter of public secondary social studies teachers do not have teaching certificates in social studies. Indeed, when I upgraded the definition of a "qualified" teacher, for instance, to include only those who held *both* a college major and a teaching certificate in the field, the amount of out-of-field teaching substantially increased.

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The negative implications of such high levels of out-of-field teaching are obvious and, not unexpectedly, the results of this research have generated widespread interest and have been featured in many national reports on education. But despite this attention, the problem of out-of-field teaching remains largely misunderstood. The crucial question, and the source of great misunderstanding, is why so many teachers have so little background in their fields.

Most assume that out-of-field teaching is a problem of poorly trained teachers. In this view, the preparation of teachers in college or university training programs lacks adequate rigor, breadth, and depth, especially in academic and substantive coursework, resulting in high levels of out-of-field teaching. Proponents of this view typically assume that the problem can be remedied by requiring prospective teachers to complete a "real" undergraduate major in an academic discipline. There is some truth to this explanation of out-of-field teaching, but it also overlooks an important source of the problem.

The managerial choice to misassign teachers may save time and money for the school, and ultimately taxpayers, but it is not cost free.

The data tell us that almost all teachers have completed an undergraduate education. Moreover, 94 percent of public school teachers and, surprisingly, over half of private school teachers hold regular state-approved

teaching certificates. The data also tell us that most teachers have multiple degrees and have specialized in one or more fields or subjects. Indeed, almost half of all public school teachers have graduate degrees.

Many of these teachers, of course, have degrees in education. But very few have only a "generic" education major or minor, such as in secondary education or curriculum and instruction, that lacks specialization in a subject. Only 3 percent of those teaching social studies, for instance, have a generic education degree. Over half have an academic major or a minor in one of the social sciences or in history. Another quarter are without an academic major or minor, but have a major or a minor in social studies education.

There is a great deal of controversy over whether subject-area education degrees, such as social studies education, are adequate. Critics argue that education degrees tend to be overloaded with required courses in education to the neglect of coursework in academic subjects. In fact, it is precisely because of the recognition of this problem that many states have, over the past decade, upgraded teacher education by, among other things, requiring education majors to complete substantial coursework in an academic discipline. As a result, one cannot assume that education degrees are without academic content. At the University of Georgia, for instance, a degree in social studies education requires as much coursework in an academic department, such as history, as does an academic degree itself. Likewise, a degree in math education requires as much coursework in the math department as does a degree in math.

Moreover, it is unrealistic to expect teachers in broad multidisciplinary fields, such as social studies and science, to have substantial coursework in all of the disciplines within the larger field. A teacher with a degree in biology and a certificate in science cannot be expected, for example, to be fully qualified in physics. Nevertheless, teachers in these broad fields are routinely required to teach any of a wide array of subjects within their departments.

My own case provides an illustration. I graduated from the University of California with a major in sociology and a minor in history. Several years later, I returned to school to take part in an intensive, yearlong teacher-certification program in social studies. Later, as a high school teacher, I felt prepared and comfortable teaching history, geography, or sociology, but neither prepared nor comfortable teaching an array of

other social studies courses--world civilization, economics, psychology, political science, civics, or anthropology. Nevertheless, I was often assigned to teach many of these very courses.

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My point is not to dismiss the importance of teacher education reforms. There is no question that the teaching force has and can continue to benefit from more rigorous education and training standards. My point is that such reforms alone will not eliminate the problem of out-of-field teaching because they do not address one of the major sources of the problem. The cause of out-of-field teaching lies not only in the amount of education or training teachers have, but also in the lack of fit between teachers' fields of preparation and their teaching assignments.

This is true for the fifth of those teaching social studies, mentioned above, who have neither a major nor a minor in any of the social sciences, in history, or in social studies education. Half of these out-of-field social studies teachers have education majors or minors in subjects such as art education or English education. The other half have academic majors or minors in disciplines such as art or English. In short, out-of-field social studies teachers rarely lack degrees or training in a specialty, they lack a major or minor in a subject related to social studies.

Again, my own case provides an illustration. Although I had a degree in sociology and history and a certificate in social studies, I was assigned to teach subjects such as special education, math, and English on a regular basis. In short, recruiting lots of new candidates into teaching and mandating more rigorous academic requirements for prospective teachers will not solve the problem if large numbers of such teachers continue to be assigned to teach subjects other than those for which they were trained.

Why then is there so much mismatch and misassignment in our schools? This question is especially pertinent for social studies because, unlike math and special education, one cannot fall back on the excuse of teacher shortages. Indeed, education policy research has long shown that social studies is a surplus field.

The answer, I believe, lies in a close examination of the way schools are run. Unlike traditional professions, teachers have only limited authority over key school decisions. The data show, for instance, that teachers have little say over which courses they are assigned, or misassigned, to teach. The allocation of teaching assignments is usually the prerogative of principals.

Ultimately, the way to upgrade the quality of teaching and teachers is to upgrade the quality of the teaching job.

Principals not only have the authority to decide who teaches which courses, they also have an unusual degree of discretion. Teaching is subject to an elaborate array of state licensing requirements designed to assure the basic preparation and competence of practitioners. However,

there is little regulation of how teachers are employed and assigned. Most states do, indeed, possess explicit policies acknowledging misassignment as an unsound practice. But unknown to the public, misassignment of teachers typically is permitted by state law. Some states have no regulations concerning teacher assignment. Others have regulations delimiting the extent to which administrators may assign teachers to subjects for which they are not officially qualified. But these standards are often not rigorous, penalties for non-compliance by schools are weak or rarely enforced, and most states routinely allow local school administrators to bypass even the limited requirements that do exist. The result is that misassignment is a legitimate administrative technique.

In this context, many principals find that assigning teachers to teach out of their fields of expertise is often not only legal but also more convenient, less expensive, or less time-consuming than the alternatives. For example, rather than find and hire a history teacher to teach a newly state-mandated advanced history curriculum, a principal may find it less expensive to assign an already employed social studies teacher to teach it, even if they have little background in history. When faced with the choice between hiring a fully qualified candidate for a vacant position or hiring a less qualified candidate who is also willing to coach a major varsity sport, a principal may find it more convenient to do the latter. If a teacher suddenly leaves in the middle of a semester, a principal may find it faster and cheaper to hire a readily available, but not fully qualified, substitute teacher, rather than conduct a formal search for a new teacher.

The degree to which a school is faced with problems of recruitment or retention may affect the extent to which the principal relies on these options, but they are available to almost all schools and used by many. In short, the managerial choice to misassign teachers may save time and money for the school, and ultimately taxpayers, but it is not cost free. One only has to look at the NAEP scores to see this.

The policy and reform implications of this view of out-of-field teaching are clear. The way to make sure there are qualified teachers in every classroom is not, for example, to assume the problem is due solely to a deficit in the quality or quantity of teachers. Schools are not simply victims, and shifting the entire blame to teachers, colleges of education, or larger forces of supply and demand only diverts attention from the way schools are managed and mismanaged. Moreover, reforms that ignore this may end up doing more harm than good. Recruitment and alternative training programs that, for instance, lower training or hiring standards could contribute to the underlying problem by continuing to treat teaching as semi-skilled work.

In the short term, there are a number of things school officials could do to reduce or prevent out-of-field teaching. When faced with hiring difficulties, schools could, for example, offer incentives or provide free retraining to attract and retain teachers. The data indicate that fewer than one-fifth of schools currently offer these options. Moreover, principals could cut back on out-of-field assignments for beginning

teachers. The data show that new teachers leave the occupation at very high rates, and high rates of teacher turnover mean that schools are faced with a constant need to recruit and hire new teachers to fill vacated positions. Burdening beginners with out-of-field courses only contributes to the problem.

Ultimately, however, the way to upgrade the quality of teaching and teachers is to upgrade the quality of the teaching job. Well-paid, well-respected occupations that offer good working conditions rarely have difficulties with recruitment or retention. If they do, they do not resort to lowering standards as a coping mechanism. If we treated teaching as a highly valued profession, one requiring expertise and skill in a specialty, there would be little problem ensuring that all classrooms were staffed with qualified teachers.

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## On the Web

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Visit the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) site to review the most recent edition of the [Nation's Report Card](#).

Read "[What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future](#)," from the [National Commission on Teaching & America's Future](#). The site includes a state-by-state report card of "[Indicators of Attention to Teacher Quality](#)."

Christopher J. Klicka of the Home School Legal Defense Association provides a legal perspective: "[The Myth of Teacher Qualifications](#)," in a 1997 editorial piece.

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