



Charter Schools and Teacher Quality

In this white paper, Mississippi First addresses three teacher quality concerns raised during the charter school debate in the 2012 legislative session.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher quality is one of the most important ingredients in ensuring high-quality schooling for every child. Research suggests that teachers are our best school-based lever for increasing student achievement for all students. Excellent teachers can help their students grow 1.5 grade levels in a single year, while to average teachers' students grow one grade level in a year and poor-performing teachers' students grow only half a grade level in a year.¹

In the 2012 legislative session, teacher quality issues made a late but powerful appearance in the contentious debate over charter school legislation. The fracas centered on language in each of the major charter school bills exempting some charter school teachers from holding state teacher certification.* These exemptions drew the ire of charter school opponents, who argued that the exemptions would allow charter schools to hire unqualified teachers for classrooms supported by public tax dollars.

In the final weeks of the session, the issue was further complicated by a rumor that the proposed exemptions would violate federal law and put Mississippi in jeopardy of losing millions of dollars in federal funds. This rumor was later repeated in local media as one of the reasons that the charter bill did not survive.

With pledges from the state's top elected officials for a charter law in the 2013 session, Mississippians need to understand the teacher quality issues raised during the 2012 legislative session. This white paper addresses three primary teacher quality concerns:

- 1. Will charter school students be at risk of having unqualified teachers if some or all charter school teachers are exempted from state certification?**
- 2. Will exemptions from state certification violate the federal *No Child Left Behind* law?**
- 3. Instead of exempting charter school teachers, why don't we just change state certification?**

* "Certification" and "licensure" are interchangeable terms: a certified teacher is the same as a licensed teacher.

1. TEACHER QUALITY AND STATE CERTIFICATION

Mississippi's achievement crisis has been a central theme of charter school supporters' arguments. Supporters of the 2012 charter school bills, including Mississippi First, contend that a well-designed charter school law could improve student achievement for academically underserved populations of students. Since excellent teaching is critical to raising student achievement, logic dictates that teacher quality in charter schools is tantamount to charters' success. Yet all the charter bills exempted some or all charter school teachers from holding state certification. Even some of the bill's proponents were confused by what appeared to be a paradox: how could charter school supporters talk about student achievement if they were allowing unqualified teachers to work in charter schools?

The answer lies in a frustrating but well-documented finding in the teacher quality research: ***state teacher certification does not predict a teacher's effectiveness in raising student achievement. Both certified teachers and uncertified teachers perform equally well, on average.*** In two prominent studies, for example, researchers studied traditionally certified, uncertified, and alternatively certified teachers in New York City and Los Angeles, the nation's two largest school districts, and found that the differences among the three groups were so small that the groups were nearly indistinguishable.² In short, ***teachers without state certification can be just as effective as teachers with state certification.***

Charter Schools and Certification Exemptions

Identifying the best teacher candidates for hire is a tricky business in a world where traditional credentials like certification, advanced degrees,³ and even years of experience⁴ are weak signals of quality. These unexpected research findings have prompted some education reformers to question whether it is wise to use state teacher certification to restrict access to the teaching profession. Currently, researchers are working to develop a portrait of the most promising new teacher candidates, but this profile is in its infancy.⁵ Policymakers, therefore, are smart to proceed with caution in granting schools the ability to hire uncertified teachers.

But if caution is warranted, why do charter schools proponents support exempting charter school teachers from state certification? Three reasons stand out:

- *"Uncertified" does not always mean "unqualified."*
Charter school teachers—even those without state certification—would still have to be highly qualified to teach. All public school teachers in Mississippi, including charter school teachers, *must* meet federal statutes governing teacher quality, which require all teachers of core subjects like math and reading to be "highly qualified" in the field in which they are teaching. Being highly qualified to work as a teacher in a charter school requires that a candidate hold a bachelor's degree and demonstrate competence in the subject in which they will teach. (For more explanation, see Section 2.) As federal law moves toward mandating all teachers to be "highly effective," charter school teachers will also have to meet this requirement.
- *Charters can find innovative ways to recruit and develop new teachers.*
Exempting some charter school teachers from state certification serves an important reform purpose. With flexibility in this area, ***charter schools can explore new, more effective ways of***

identifying and training the individuals most qualified to teach, regardless of initial certification. For example, some charter schools are pioneering new teacher residency models that utilize the teaching excellence and expertise in high-performing charter schools to train new teacher candidates on the job; candidates begin teaching without certification but after successful completion of the program in which they demonstrate their skills, the residency programs enable them to earn certification.⁶ Exploring better teacher policies is one of the most valuable avenues for innovation that charter schools provide; traditional education can expand these best practices to the entire public school system.

- ***Greater accountability in charter schools protects teacher quality***
Charter schools face much higher accountability standards than traditional public schools. Not only must charter schools follow state and federal accountability systems, they must also set annual goals for a broader list of achievement measures⁷ than traditional schools. Charters that miss their goals face corrective action or closure—even if they are not “failing” compared to traditional public schools. In contrast, traditional public schools must be persistently failing before the state intervenes and can produce mediocrity in perpetuity without any consequences from the state. This ***higher accountability serves as a very strong incentive for charters to hire the very best people to teach in their schools.***

2. COMPLIANCE WITH FEDERAL LAW

Each of the three major charter school bills considered in the 2012 session exempted some or all charter school teachers from state certification: both Senate Bill 2401 and House Bill 1152 (as amended by the Senate) granted 50% of charter school teachers an exemption, while HB888 granted 100% of charter teachers an exemption. Although charter school opponents challenged the exemptions early in the debate, it was not until late in the session that legislators began to question whether the state certification exemptions would jeopardize Mississippi’s millions in federal education dollars provided through *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), the current version of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*.

This fear is unfounded. ***Each charter bill unequivocally stated that “public charter schools shall comply with applicable federal laws, rules, and regulations regarding the qualification of teachers and other instructional staff.”***⁸ Conversations with legislators revealed that fears of a loss in federal funds arose from a misunderstanding of NCLB’s teacher quality provisions, which require all public school teachers who teach in core academic subjects to be “highly qualified.”

Charter Schools and No Child Left Behind

The “highly qualified teacher” requirements of NCLB were a response to a growing body of teacher quality research which demonstrated that while knowledge of content matters most to good teaching,⁹ many states allowed teachers to teach subjects in which they lacked expertise. For example, in many states, an athletic coach with no background in mathematics could teach Algebra without any real consequences. ***NCLB thus required all teachers not only to have a bachelor’s degree but also to have “demonstrated competence” in the field in which they were teaching.*** Teachers could demonstrate competence either by passing a rigorous test of content knowledge chosen by the state or, in the case of

middle and high school teachers, by holding a bachelor’s degree in the field. As a result, only math specialists would be able to teach math.

When NCLB was written in 2001, the charter school movement was just beginning to take off nationally, but many were intrigued by the promising new tactics that some charter schools were implementing. To preserve the ability of charter schools to innovate, the framers of ***NCLB specifically deferred to states, allowing them to exempt charter school teachers from holding state certification***. Consequently, Title IX, Part A, Section 9101(23) of NCLB outlines distinct definitions for “highly qualified” traditional public school teachers and charter school teachers (see **Table 1**). Though all teachers in core academic subjects—whether in charters or traditional public schools—must hold a bachelor’s degree and demonstrate competence in the field in which they are teaching, *only* traditional public school teachers must hold state certification in order to be highly qualified. For this reason, Mississippi cannot exempt all public school teachers from certification but may exempt charter school teachers.

Table 1. Federal Definitions of “Highly

Traditional Public School Teachers	Charter School Teachers
Hold a bachelor’s degree	Hold a bachelor’s degree
Demonstrate competence in the field in which they will teach, e.g., <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elementary teacher—pass a rigorous state test demonstrating competence • Middle or High school teacher—pass a rigorous state test <u>OR</u> hold a bachelor’s degree in the field 	Demonstrate competence in the field in which they will teach., e.g., <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elementary teacher—pass a rigorous state test demonstrating competence • Middle or High school teacher—pass a rigorous state test <u>OR</u> hold a bachelor’s degree in the field
Hold current state certification	<u>ONLY</u> hold current state certification <u>IF</u> the state charter school law requires it

To sum, ***exempting charter school teachers from state certification is in compliance with No Child Left Behind***. Mississippi is not in jeopardy of losing federal funds by exempting charter school teachers from state certification. Even Mississippi’s new waiver from some provisions of *No Child Left Behind* will not require the state to mandate that charter school teachers hold state certification. In fact, 21 states and DC automatically exempt some or all charter school teachers from state certification; additional states, including Arkansas, allow charter applicants to request waivers from state certification.¹⁰

Highly Qualified Vs. State Certified

The real difference between highly-qualified, state certified teachers and highly-qualified charter school teachers who lack state certification depends on the state, since certification requirements vary. In Mississippi, basic state certification has two pathways—traditional and alternate (see **Table 2**). Each of these pathways requires completion of an approved teacher preparation program in addition to a bachelor’s degree and passage of a national teacher skills test.

Table 2. Mississippi Certification Requirements

Traditional Certification	Alternate Certification
Bachelor’s degree in TEACHER EDUCATION	Bachelor’s degree in ANY FIELD
Praxis II test in Principles of Learning and Teaching	Praxis I (Pre-Professional Skills test)
Praxis II test in Subject Area	Praxis II in Subject Area
	Completion of an approved alternate route teacher education program (such as Teach For America, Mississippi Teacher Corps, etc.)

According to Mississippi’s current rules, ***the only difference between a certified teacher and a “highly qualified” charter school teacher without certification is that a certified teacher has completed an approved teacher preparation program.*** As this paper described in Section 1, the teacher quality research has found no differences, on average, between teachers who complete teacher preparation programs to become certified and those who do not.¹¹

Non-Certified Personnel

Exempting some teachers from state certification rules is not new to Mississippi. Mississippi Code 37-3-2 (6)(e) allows public schools to hire non-certified personnel to teach up to 3 periods a day. The Mississippi Department of Education refers to this law as the “Expert Citizen License” provision. A school district superintendent must request permission from the Mississippi Department of Education for each non-certified person the district wishes to hire. Non-certified persons may not exceed 5% of the district’s staff. However, “expert citizens” cannot teach in core academic subjects and be considered “highly qualified” because the state does not grant these persons actual certification even if the state approves the application for hire. ***As a result, under current law, charter schools could not hire professional chemists to teach chemistry and still count them as “highly qualified” if the state does not exempt some percentage of charter school teachers from state certification.***

3. CHANGING STATE CERTIFICATION

Mississippi First does not believe that these research findings mean that anyone and everyone can be a good teacher. Teaching is a serious and demanding craft, requiring special skills honed through intentional practice. State teacher certification should indicate a level of expertise and dedication that distinguishes the professional from the layperson. Unfortunately, today’s methods of certifying teachers do not identify which teachers excel and which are poor; as we explain above, today’s certification does not even guarantee that a certified teacher will perform better in a classroom than someone without certification. Without a doubt, education needs to re-think the way we certify teachers so that certification is a meaningful distinction and accurately reflects the valuable and unique expertise of our nation’s great teachers.

Changing state certification is a colossal task, certainly one that is much larger than the charter school bill. While Mississippi First supports exploring new, more rigorous methods of granting professional certification to excellent veteran teachers and promising novices, we do not believe that the work of changing our current system is reason to either postpone or abandon charter school legislation. In fact,

the opposite is true: *rigorous charter legislation with limited exemptions can be a first step in reforming state certification.*

CONCLUSION

Mississippi's charter school law should strike a balance between allowing every great candidate to teach regardless of certification and maintaining a reasonable minimum bar for qualifications. The federal definition of "highly qualified" is the right entry requirement for charter school teachers. To be "highly qualified," charter school teachers must hold a bachelor's degree and demonstrate competence in the field in which they are teaching. With the presence of this key requirement in the charter law, charters will have both a regulatory reason and a performance incentive to hire the very best teachers for their students.

About Mississippi First

Mississippi First is a non-partisan, non-profit organization whose mission is *to advocate the best public policy solutions and to revitalize Mississippi's democracy.* In addition to charter schools, Mississippi First currently advocates for pre-Kindergarten, sex education, and school turnaround policies. To contact Mississippi First, email contact@mississippifirst.org.

¹ Hanushek, Eric. "The trade-off between child quantity and quality." *Journal of Political Economy* 100 (February 1992): 84-117.

² Gordon, Robert, Thomas Kane, and Douglas Staiger. *Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job.* Discussion Paper, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, April 2006.

Kane, Thomas, Jonah Rockoff, and Douglas Staiger. "What does certification tell us about teacher effectiveness? Evidence from New York City." *Economics of Education Review*, 2008: 615-631.

³ Research has consistently shown that advanced degrees have no relationship to student achievement, with the possible exception of mathematics degrees for secondary education teachers. For a good review of the research on degrees, see

Prince, Cynthia D., Julia Koppich, Tamara Morse Azar, Monica Bhatt, and Peter J. Witham. "What do we know about the relationship between student achievement and teachers' educational attainment and experience, which is the traditional way that teacher salaries are determined?" *Center for Educator Compensation Reform.* http://www.cecr.ed.gov/researchSyntheses/Research%20Synthesis_Q%20A2.pdf (accessed November 14, 2012).

⁴ Research has found a positive relationship between teacher experience and achievement but largely only for the first few years of teaching. While experience gains level off significantly after the first few years of teaching (between three and five years), state policies continue to reward teachers disproportionately for each additional year of service, regardless of results. Again, for a good review of the research on teacher experience, see Prince, Cynthia D., Julia Koppich, Tamara Morse Azar, Monica Bhatt, and Peter J. Witham. "What do we know about the relationship between student achievement and teachers' educational attainment and experience, which is the traditional way that teacher salaries are determined?" *Center for Educator Compensation Reform.* http://www.cecr.ed.gov/researchSyntheses/Research%20Synthesis_Q%20A2.pdf (accessed November 14, 2012).

⁵ Dobbie, Will. *Teacher Characteristics and Student Achievement: Evidence from Teach For America.* Working Paper, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, July 2011.

Rockoff, Jonah, and Cecilia Speneri. "Subjective and Objective Evaluations of Teacher Effectiveness." *American Economic Review* 100, no. 2 (2010): 261-266.

Rockoff, Jonah, Brian Jacob, Thomas Kane, and Douglas Staiger. "Can you recognize an effective teacher when you recruit one?" *Education Finance and Policy* 6, no. 1 (2011): 43-74.

⁶ For example, see the Match Charter Schools Teacher Residency program (<http://matcheducation.org/mtr>) or the KIPPDC/E.L. Haynes Public Charter School Capital Teaching Residency program (<http://www.kippdc.org/careers/capital-teaching-residency/>).

⁷ Traditional schools are graded by three measures under the state accountability system: achievement of students on state tests, whether students met predicted growth, and high school graduation, if applicable. Charter schools would be required not only to meet these requirements but also to set and meet goals on an additional set of academic indicators called a performance framework. See state accountability requirements here:

<http://orshome.mde.k12.ms.us/ors/accountability/2009/MSAS-U.pdf>; 2011 changes here:

<http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/docs/public-notice/2011-apa-ms-acct-system.pdf?sfvrsn=1>. Note that in 2012, the Legislature changed the accountability labels from a seven-category descriptive system to a five-category “A-F” system. See that bill here: <http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2012/pdf/SB/2700-2799/SB2776SG.pdf>. See also performance framework requirements included in the charter school bills from the Mississippi 2012 Regular Legislative Session: SB2401 (as passed the Senate)—Sec 7(1), lines 649-93; HB1152 (as amended by the Senate)—Sec 7(1), lines 670-718; HB888 (committee substitute)—Sec 21(1); lines 721-765.

⁸ See charter school bills from the Mississippi 2012 Regular Legislative Session: SB2401 (as passed the Senate)—Sec 8(6)(a), lines 969-71; HB1152 (as amended by the Senate)—Sec 8(6)(a), lines 990-92; HB888 (committee substitute)—Sec 28(1), lines 1049-1051.

⁹ See for example the following publications from the Education Trust which were current in the run-up to the passage of *No Child Left Behind*'s passage in 2001:

Mitchell, Ruth, and Patte Barth. "How Teacher Licensing Tests Fall Short." *Thinking K-16, Education Trust*, Spring 1999: 3-16.

Haycock, Kati. "No More Settling for Less." *Thinking K-16, Education Trust*, Spring 2000: 3-12.

¹⁰ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. *Measuring Up to the Model: A Tool for Comparing State Charter School Laws. Component > Automatic Exemptions from Many State and District Laws and Regulations.* <http://www.publiccharters.org/law/ViewComponent.aspx?comp=16> (accessed November 14, 2012).

¹¹ See Endnote 2.