Two New Teacher Ed Bills Introduced in the Senate

On April 22, Senators Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) and Jack Reed (D-R.I.) introduced companion legislation to reauthorize Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA). The Bingaman bill (S. 2340), the Capacity to Learn for All Students and Schools (CLASS) Act, and the Reed bill (S. 2335), the Preparing, Recruiting and Retaining Education Professionals (PRREP) Act, deal with teacher preparation programs at colleges and universities.

The two bills mesh with the changes proposed in the HEA legislation introduced by Senator Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) in October 2003. (For more details, see WIR, 11/4/2003.) The Senate Democrats have approached Title II with three themes in mind: accountability (in the Bingaman bill), preparation (in the Reed bill), and recruitment (in the Kennedy bill).

The CLASS and PRREP bills address several NAICU goals: providing more assistance for partnership grants so that institutions can improve their teacher preparation programs; eliminating the ranking of institutions on the state report cards; and creating new incentives to attract and retain teachers, especially minority and special education teachers. NAICU would support many of the program improvements made in these bills.

However, the bills also raise two major issues that we do not support. One is called “program-teacher-pupil” evaluation, and the other is related to data collection.

Program-teacher-pupil evaluation

“Program-teacher-pupil” evaluation grades teacher education programs on the classroom achievement of students taught by their graduates. It requires some measure of student achievement to be tracked to the teacher in the classroom, and then back to the institution where the teacher was prepared.

NAICU has worked closely with Bingaman’s staff over the last few months, and fought back the original idea that the measure of student achievement would be the state assessments under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. We also fought back the inclusion of program-teacher-pupil evaluation as part of the state grant evaluation. However, Bingaman has included the notion as a pilot study allowed under the state grants.

The pilot study would be voluntary, with the goal of providing “credible and persuasive evidence that graduates of teacher education programs are effective at improving student achievement.” It would assess the impact of graduates on achievement; identify special practices that improve student achievement; identify variables that can influence student achievement; and develop mechanisms to use the information gathered to improve teacher education programs.

Program-teacher-pupil evaluation also pops up in the Reed bill. To be approved for the state grant program, states must have a mechanism to measure and assess the effectiveness and impact of the teacher preparation programs, including the impact on student assessment. Since Bingaman takes the lead on accountability issues, the Reed bill includes less detail on this concept.

Obviously there are many questions about how this could be implemented: What kind of system would have to be created to track student achievement, from the classroom, to the teacher, to the institution? How could such a system be created without violating the privacy of teachers and students? How does a stu-

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dent’s test score or other measurement reflect the competence of the teacher?

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities supports “program-teacher-pupil” evaluation as a way to bring teacher preparation programs into line with state program requirements for teacher preparation, and state testing requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act.

NAICU believes that the idea of tracking teacher quality to something as concrete as a student’s test score does not take into consideration the multiple factors that go into making a good teacher, and does not measure the knowledge teachers gain in their preparation. We do not support putting the “program-teacher-pupil” evaluation into federal statute.

Data collection

The Bingaman bill allows funds under the state grant program to be used to develop or expand data systems on teacher education. While it states that “any data system shall be designed to not infringe on students’ privacy rights,” it also allows states to integrate and coordinate the analysis of student data from K-12, through college, to eventual employment. Bingaman says this data system would help states to improve their public education systems and teacher education programs. In addition to the obvious problems with privacy, a federally funded state database would be another example of the federal government getting into a state issue.

The Bingaman bill supports the need for a “national and public database” developed by the secretary of education, as included in the Kennedy bill. This database would contain state pass rates on certification and licensure tests; teacher placement rates; the percentage of full-time faculty in teacher education programs; the tracking of graduates five years after completing a teacher education program; and other information “as necessary.” The secretary would also coordinate information on teachers who took state assessment tests in states other than that in which they received their degree.

Reed’s bill focuses on including as many disciplines as possible in teacher preparation programs, to give the prospective teacher a full education. It also calls for states to collect data on teacher retention, by school, to evaluate the effectiveness of the state’s teacher support system.

It may make sense that more data at the state, school, college, and teacher levels would improve teacher education programs. However, NAICU believes that teacher licensure and program accreditation requirements are a state responsibility. We oppose the creation of a national database, a national report card on teacher preparation, or any related federal or national report.

Outlook

While Bingaman and Reed are in the Senate minority, it is important to follow their action on the reauthorization of Title II. Bingaman is especially vital to watch because of his interest in state and institutional accountability for teacher preparation programs. Both were key players in the last reauthorization, and are expected to be players in this year’s HEA reauthorization, if it is considered in the Senate.

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