Debate over State Standards
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WASHINGTON -- An attempt by the Obama administration to change how the nation’s teachers are trained took its first steps here this week, as a committee far from the high-profile debates over No Child Left Behind began to discuss how the federal government should measure the quality of teacher education programs.

The federal rule-making panel was charged with recommending data reporting requirements for teacher preparation programs, criteria states should use to assess and identify low-performing programs, and, in the broadest question, the definition of a “high-quality teacher preparation program,” among other issues.

After three days of discussion, some broad areas of agreement (and disagreement) had emerged from the 18-member panel, which is made up of representatives from all sectors of higher education as well as teachers’ unions, Teach for America, nonprofit advocacy groups and schools and school districts. But so had a persistent question raised about many of the six issues that the panel addressed last week: Should the Education Department be addressing these questions in this forum?

The Obama administration has been clear about its plans for teacher preparation programs, beginning with a speech by Education Secretary Arne Duncan in 2009 in which he said “many, if not most” schools of education were doing a “mediocre” job preparing future teachers. In October, the department released “Our Future, Our Teachers,” a plan for changing teacher education that called for changing reporting requirements to include “outcome-based” measures, such as how successful teachers are in the classroom after graduation; creating new grant programs aimed at high-performing programs; and investing in teacher education at minority-serving institutions.

Some of those changes would require Congressional approval. But others, especially changes to the reporting requirements, formed the basis of the rule-making panel’s agenda last week. As the committee began discussing what criteria states should use to evaluate whether programs are performing well, several members asked whether the Education Department should dictate those measures to the states at all.

The protests were loudest from members affiliated in some way with the states themselves -- whether state education departments or public universities -- but others, including negotiators representing private institutions, joined in.

“I’m not sure it’s appropriate for us to make a list of things and say, ‘Tennessee, this is what you need to do,’” said Vance Rugaard, executive director of the Tennessee Department of Education’s Office of Teacher Licensing. “I think we may be overstepping here.”
Title II of the Higher Education Act, which governs teacher education, requires the U.S. education secretary to “prescribe regulations to ensure the reliability, validity, integrity and accuracy” of the data states submit to the federal government. Education Department representatives at the rule-making panel argued that this included recommending minimum standards, or other criteria, that the states should use, but did not directly answer challenges from panel members as to whether the law gave them this authority.

The distinction was seen as especially important because one of the areas the rule-making panel addressed was the standards states use to tag programs as “low performing” or “at risk,” meaning they could lose federal money for student financial aid.

While the majority of the panel's members raised concerns about whether the federal government should set state criteria, some members -- especially those representing school districts or nonprofit groups -- pushed for the administration’s role in setting higher standards.

“At some point, you have to say these teachers who are coming out of a particular program aren’t able to meet the needs of the students in front of them,” said Thalia Nawi, an alternate panel member and the director of Denver Teacher Residency, an alternate certification program. “It’s folly on our part to think what we’re doing right now, the status quo, is meeting the needs of our students.”

Negotiators representing colleges, states and accrediting agencies pushed back against the criticism. The current criteria do not always reflect the situation accurately, they said, because the data reported are sometimes too broad. For example, universities could close some programs within an education school for low performance, but such an adjustment would be too small to show up in reports.

“None of us fear accountability,” said Jim Cibulka, president of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education. “None of us fear the elimination of poor programs.” But the criteria need to make sense for all programs, he said.

When the panel reached its broadest question, defining a “high-quality teacher preparation program” for the purposes of awarding TEACH Grants, which give up to $4,000 per year to students who agree to teach in a high-need area after graduation, some members said they would prefer that Congress, not a federal panel, define the term. Others said that the TEACH Grants, because of their specific purpose, were the wrong place to begin defining a quality teacher preparation program. A standard that relied in part on programs' admissions criteria, such as high school grade-point averages or SAT scores, could make programs at minority-serving institutions ineligible, even if those programs eventually produce good teachers, some committee members said.

“I don’t think the TEACH Grant is a program to drive the substantial reform of teacher education,” said David Prasse, dean of the school of education at Loyola University Chicago. “If there’s hesitation around this issue, it’s not [that] we’re opposed to reform and high standards.... I think there needs to be careful thought about how we drive the improvement of teacher preparation in this nation and what vehicles we use to do that.”
By the end of Friday’s meeting, committee members had largely agreed that “high-quality programs” should not be based on a ranking system (the top half of all programs in a given state, for example) but on absolute criteria that all programs would have to meet.

But what, exactly, those criteria would be is a discussion likely to continue when negotiators convene next month, with a proposed regulation written by the Education Department to guide them.


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