White House Turns Up Heat on Teacher Preparation

By Stephen Sawchuk

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Long-delayed federal rules aiming to hold teacher-preparation programs accountable for producing effective talent are getting a surprise boost from none other than the White House.

The Obama administration will release those rules for comment this summer and intends to issue a final version within a year.

Among other things, the regulations are likely to require states to strengthen procedures for identifying weak teacher-preparation programs, and will probably bar the worst from offering federal financial aid to would-be teachers.

"This is something that the president has a real sense of urgency about," said Cecilia Muñoz, the director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, during a conference call with reporters last month. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan also joined the call. "What happens in the classroom matters," she said. "It doesn't just matter, it's really the whole ballgame."

For some observers, the rules are an important lever for action.

"The administration is calling the question here, and it could not be more important," Arthur Levine, the president of the Princeton, N.J.-based Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation and the author of a scathing 2006 report on teacher preparation, said in a statement. "There are excellent teacher education programs in America, but far too many are poor. These programs need to be strengthened or closed."

Many college groups, however, are nervous about the push. They argue that, similar to the administration's bid to produce college ratings across the board, the plan amounts to an executive overreach.

**Revamped Plan**

Though billed as an executive action by President Barack Obama, the plan is really the revival of a 2012 effort. Early that year, the Education Department attempted to put teeth in what are generally considered fairly lax accountability requirements for teacher colleges in the Higher Education Act.

Through a process known as "negotiated rulemaking," it proposed requiring every state to use several specific indicators to grade programs, such as how graduates fared in boosting student achievement, whether they had good retention rates in schools, and whether alumni and districts surveyed were satisfied with the quality of their preparation.

And it wanted to restrict the nearly $100 million-a-year TEACH grants, which subsidize teacher-candidates who agree to teach in high-need schools, to only top-rated programs.
But the effort fell apart in April 2012 after negotiators representing the department, K-12 educators, and a variety of teacher-preparation institutions couldn't agree on specifics. When that happened, the Education Department got the green light to draft the rules on its own.

The April 25 announcement came as the first major sign that the agency hadn't given up on the rules, despite resistance from teacher-college and higher education groups, which are concerned about the financial-aid precedent set by these proposals.

"The higher ed. community was kind of aghast at that, and not just in teacher ed. The fear was, is this what's coming next?" said Rick Ginsberg, the dean of the education school at the University of Kansas, in Lawrence. "They were trying to come up with a stick, but it could end up hurting the very students who need it the most."

**Details Scarce**

Details on what the agency will ultimately demand from programs remain scarce. Federal officials demurred when queried on whether the forthcoming summer draft would mirror the language and indicators proposed in 2012.

Mr. Duncan did say, though, that some measure of student-achievement growth should be considered.

"Today, unfortunately, too many teacher-preparation programs get little or no info on how their graduates are actually doing once they enter the teaching profession," he said. "That is simply unacceptable and must change."

Some of the indicators discussed are already beginning to shape the field. Last summer, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation approved new standards for those seeking its voluntary stamp of approval. Programs would be expected to use "value added" data based on student tests where available and other measures, such as surveys, to gauge program effectiveness.

Mr. Ginsberg, who served on the panel that helped craft those standards, urged the Obama administration not to assign too much weight to any one measure.

"CAEP walked a very fine line of trying to embrace the controversy around the various array of measures, while at the same time recognizing that in a world of nonperfect data we do need to use some. The key for us is multiple sources of evidence so you can make the best decision with what's available," he said.

Meanwhile, the White House Office of Management and Budget must perform a cost-benefit analysis of any new rules before they can be published. After that, the rules go out for public comment—usually for 60 to 90 days—and only after that can a final rule be issued.

The Education Department nevertheless promised a final rule within a year.

"We go into this very humbly and look forward to getting lots of feedback from the public," Mr. Duncan said, but he intimated that he doesn't have much patience for naysayers.
There's been "such a lack of transparency, so much opaqueness [in teacher preparation], I don't think anyone can or should defend the status quo," he said. "Anyone who thinks what we're doing is good enough, that to me is a real stretch."