

Thousands of California teachers missing needed credentials

By Joanna Lin, California Watch

The last time Charlie Parker took a social studies class, he was a teenager with an Afro and Jimmy Carter was president of the United States. Yet here he was, standing at the front of a classroom, trying to teach dozens of high schoolers subjects that never appealed to him when he learned them more than 30 years ago.



On his first day teaching U.S. history, world history and economics at McAlister High School in Los Angeles nearly four years ago, Parker struggled to keep his course materials straight and handed a student the wrong textbook. Some days, his students' questions went unanswered or were directed to the Internet. Later, Parker said, when his students took state tests, their scores were low.

After school, Parker said, "I was doing homework, just like the kids."

These were not the troubles of a rookie teacher. In fact, Parker had taught for more than 20 years, including 11 at McAlister.

The problem for Parker, who taught social studies at McAlister for two years and now teaches at another Los Angeles high school, was that he should not have taught history to begin with.

Every year in California, public school administrators assign thousands of teachers to classes for which they lack the credentials or legal authorization to teach. Untrained teachers have been assigned to a variety of difficult classes, including those filled with English-language learners and others with special intellectual and physical needs. Or, in Parker's case, to teach social studies when they're credentialed for biology.

Nearly 1 in 10 teachers or certificated personnel – more than 32,000 school employees – did not have the credentials or authorization for their positions from 2007 through 2011, according to data compiled by the state Commission on Teacher Credentialing.

The problem is greater at low-performing schools, where students are overwhelmingly low-income and Latino. The average rate of improperly assigned teachers at these schools was 16 percent over the same period.

“That isn't something that should be acceptable to anybody,” said Brooks Allen, director of education advocacy at the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California.

In the 2010-11 school year, more than 12,000 teachers and certificated personnel at more than 1,000 low-performing schools served in positions they should not have held. On average at these schools, 82 percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price meals, and more than three-quarters were Latino, a California Watch analysis found.

Research and interviews with state and local education officials suggest that staffing turnover and shortages, insufficient resources, poor planning and mismanagement contribute to assigning teachers to classes for which they lack specialized training.

This problem of “misassignments,” as they're known, has improved dramatically since the 2005-06 school year, when the

state began giving greater attention to teacher assignments at low-performing schools. At the time, 29 percent of teachers at these schools lacked licenses for their positions.

Teachers gaining authorization to instruct English-language learners have driven much of that progress. The extra scrutiny – a product of *Williams v. California*, a landmark class-action lawsuit that in 2004 charged the state with ensuring all students had qualified, credentialed teachers – also has helped.

Still, the rate of improperly assigned teachers at low-performing schools has hovered above a persistent 12 percent. (It's unclear how California ranks nationally; states have different standards and policies for employing teachers, making comparisons difficult.)

"The persistence of misassignments, year over year, even with annual monitoring, certainly suggests that it's something that needs to be looked at," said Allen, the attorney assigned to implement the *Williams* settlement.

Public Advocates, which represented students in the *Williams* lawsuit, has called for the Legislature to hold a hearing on the problem and for the credentialing commission to push the issue.

Alamo Democrat Joan Buchanan, chairwoman of the Assembly Education Committee, said that while she is open to holding a hearing, she is "not sure passing a law is going to be like waving a magic wand and solve the problem there." She said she hoped the State Board of Education and Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson would also look into the issue.

Ensuring teachers are appropriately licensed "is very important back-office work that nobody ever sees and can pay huge dividends and, in some instances, be very harmful to kids," said Michael Hanson, superintendent of the Fresno

Unified School District.

In one case, at the public Berkeley Technology Academy, a student failed the California High School Proficiency Examination after enrolling in a class intended to prepare her and other credit-deficient students for the test. The student later told her mother that the class included nothing she encountered on the exam, which allows students to receive the equivalent of a high school diploma.

“I paid good money for my daughter to participate (in) this CHSPE experiment only to find out that the teacher may have been unqualified to teach it, and that she did not adequately prepare the students to take the final exam,” the student’s mother wrote in a June 2011 complaint.

The Berkeley Unified School District acknowledged in a letter to the mother that a noncredentialed staff member had taught the course. It offered her daughter 20 hours of private instruction and the option to enroll at the high school for a fifth year.

While credentials and legal authorization do not guarantee effective teachers, they represent the baseline qualifications that educators must have. If a teacher has been assigned to the wrong class, his or her performance evaluation is nullified under state law, making it more difficult to identify bad – and good – teachers.

The Commission on Teacher Credentialing typically needs to work with only a handful of school districts that struggle to resolve improper assignments on their own, said Roxann Purdue, a consultant in the agency’s professional services division.

Yet the lengthy, laborious and often paper-heavy process of monitoring assignments means that teachers and other staff can remain in the wrong positions for months.

County offices of education typically begin compiling

paperwork from school districts in late fall or winter. Once they identify teachers who lack necessary credentials or authorization and notify the district, the district has 30 days to address the problems. By the time it's all resolved – teachers must be reassigned, get the appropriate credentials, receive emergency or short-term permits or local authorizations, obtain waivers or resign – the school year could be nearly over.

In the 2011-12 school year, for example, Alameda County notified the Oakland Unified School District on May 15 to correct any remaining teacher assignment problems by June 30 – 15 days after the school year ended, records show. A letter listed 50 teachers whose qualifications were unclear or who held inappropriate assignments.

“If we had a whole bunch of people working on it, we could identify the misassignment sooner. You’re talking about one manager, one analyst – that’s all we are,” said Stephanie Tomasi, Alameda’s credentials manager.

County officials said there’s little they can do to expedite the monitoring process. School schedules and staffing tend to shift during the first month or two of school, so counties don’t begin monitoring until classes are settled. Schools, too, need time to gather their records.

“It seems like we want to catch it (improperly assigned teachers) really early in the school year so you don’t have a student going all year without services or whatever they need,” said Teresa Ussery, a credential analyst for Stanislaus County, which requests district documents in October and reports assignment problems in March and April. “But just because of timelines and processes, it’s very hard to do that – especially if it’s a large district.”

Still, Ussery said, problems identified late in one school year pay off the following school year. Schools learn to not

repeat the same mistakes, she said.

In the Berkeley case, for example, the district said that the class led by an uncredentialed staff member would no longer be offered and that credentialed teachers would teach all courses at the school.

Improper assignments often are the result of school administrators who do not know that even elective or short-term courses require appropriate certification, said Purdue of the credentialing commission.

Middle and high schools in particular, she said, are offering more experimental courses that are less straightforward to staff than, say, a physics class.

Still, nearly 2,400 teachers in low-performing schools were assigned to teach core academic subjects – English, math, science and social science – without the appropriate credentials or authorization during the 2010-11 school year.

By comparison, teachers lacking authorization to teach English-language learners – which numbered more than 22,200 in the 2005-06 school year – plummeted to 1,575.

“That is a success story,” said Allen of the ACLU. “So the question is, what is it that needs to be done to have that similar trend across the board?”

California teachers of all subjects must have authorization to teach English learners, even if they have just one student in their class who is learning the language. But Purdue said what worked to increase authorizations for teaching English-language learners does not apply to other subjects.

“It’s an isolated problem with a permanent solution, whereas the other subjects areas, it’s a new opportunity to misassign them every semester and every year,” she said.

The commission tackled the problem with English-learner

authorization by first offering training opportunities to existing credentialed teachers. It then phased in English-learner training at educator preparation programs so that all new teachers would automatically have the authorization.

“You’d keep closing the circle until it becomes smaller and smaller,” Purdue said. “But you can’t do that for math, because if someone’s misassigned in math, we have to have all teachers authorized in every subject to close every loophole.”

Hanson, of Fresno Unified, said assigning teachers outside of what their credentials allow is sometimes the best solution to a Rubik’s cube of teachers, students, courses and schedules.

In the last school year, for example, scheduling conflicts led to a high school algebra teacher instructing one period of geometry, a course the teacher’s credential did not permit. “I’m not going to find a geometry teacher who can work one period during the day,” Hanson said. “Here’s the only way I can get it done.”

In certain locations and subjects, such as math, science and special education, incorrect assignments could reflect teacher shortages. These shortages are most critical in schools concentrated with low-income and minority students and in districts with fewer resources, a state task force reported in September.

“You can’t leave it up to local principals to find good teachers and well-prepared teachers if they don’t exist,” said Linda Darling-Hammond, chairwoman of the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, who also co-led the task force. “Ultimately, you have to invest in getting enough teachers in shortage fields and invest in getting enough teachers who will teach in shortage locations.”

Teacher layoffs – California schools cut about 32,000 teachers between 2007-08 and 2010-11 – ought to have produced a larger supply of qualified teachers, said John Affeldt, who served as

lead counsel on the Williams lawsuit and is a managing attorney at Public Advocates.

But most districts have policies that allow them to hold on to teachers in high-need areas, even when layoffs are required, said Sharon Robison, the Association of California School Administrators' liaison to the credentialing commission. Teachers who are laid off are not always qualified in the subjects or available in the locations that schools need, she said.

It took Oakland Unified five months to find a permanent teacher for a class of 12 severely disabled children at Fred T. Korematsu Discovery Academy. Seven substitutes led the class before a teacher from Washington state could take over Nov. 1, more than two months after the start of the school year.

Of the 30 to 40 applications Principal Charles Wilson saw prior to the teacher's hiring, seven applicants had appropriate credentials and three were interviewed. None was a good fit for the position, he said.

Low-performing schools like his are sometimes accused of "intentionally trying to hire young, kind of throwaway teachers because they're cheap," Wilson said. "But the reality of it is those kinds of (qualified, experienced) teachers don't apply to these kinds of schools. They don't take an interview."

Even though his elementary school has a positive reputation as being supportive of teachers, Wilson said, "people are scared. ... It's too much of a stress they don't want to take on."

Education officials and critics agree that much progress has been made in reducing the number of incorrect assignments. Among nearly 300 low-performing schools that had improper assignments for six consecutive years, 79 percent had fewer instances of the problem in 2010-11 than they did in 2005-06.

Seven years ago, Huntington Park Senior High School, south of downtown Los Angeles, had more improper assignments than any other school in the state. In fact, it had more misassignments than it had teachers – 477 in all, indicating that staff members lacked more than one necessary credential or authorization for their positions.

After years of poor student performance, Huntington Park underwent a dramatic district-ordered transformation in 2011 that switched it from a year-round calendar to traditional school year and required teachers to reinterview for their jobs. The school replaced about 70 percent of its staff in less than two months.

School administrators, themselves newcomers, saw the process as an opportunity to ensure all teachers had the credentials for a predictable stable of classes that mirror those required for admittance to California universities, said Freddy Lara, the school's assistant principal. Lara said the Los Angeles Unified School District referred the school only qualified, credentialed candidates for each position.

Today, the school's principal, Lupe Hernandez, reports that the campus has no incorrect assignments. But Huntington Park may be an outlier. Most schools cannot require all their teachers to reapply for jobs, and doing so would not necessarily prevent future assignment problems.

"This is really about the tension between what students need every year and the adults that we've already hired in the system and probably have permanent (tenured) status," said Hanson of Fresno Unified.

Schools should always strive to have no improperly assigned teachers, Hanson and other education officials said. But they doubted that was a realistic possibility.

"I don't think it's a menacing problem that people haven't really tried to work on," said Robison of the Association of

California School Administrators. "It's just that you have over 1,000 school districts, hundreds of thousands of students, and on any given day, you're going to have a vacancy you need to fill because you have students who are there and ready to learn – and expecting to learn – and you have to teach them."