

The Elephant in the Living Room

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Abstract

As policymakers and education leaders around the country make plans to meet the ambitious goals in the federal No Child Left Behind Act, they would be well advised to take a close look at the distribution of teacher talent. In fact, the act requires exactly that. State and local education leaders must now publicly report data on the number of poor and minority children taught by inexperienced, out-of-field, or uncertified teachers. More important, they must take steps to assure that such children are no longer taught disproportionately by underqualified teachers.

For many years, national and state research has shown that low-income children and children of color are systematically taught by lesser quality teachers—no matter how teacher qualifications are measured. Until recently, however, it was not clear how much damage that practice did. But research over the past several years demonstrates that the maldistribution of teacher talent depresses student achievement, contributing heavily to the large achievement gap that separates poor and minority children from other young Americans.

This paper reviews the evidence on the distribution of teacher characteristics and summarizes available research on the impact of uneven distribution on poor and minority children. It also describes some of the efforts currently under way to change who teaches whom and suggests some alternate approaches that might respond more effectively to the findings in recent research about teacher preferences and system problems.