TEACHER QUALITY

Approaches, Implementation, and Evaluation of Key Federal Efforts

What GAO Found

While the overall goal of Title II in both HEA and NCLBA is to improve teacher quality, some of their specific approaches differ. For example, a major focus of HEA provisions is on the training of prospective teachers while NCLBA provisions focus more on improving teacher quality in the classroom and hiring highly qualified teachers. Both laws use reporting mechanisms to increase accountability; however, HEA focuses more on institutions of higher education while NCLBA focuses on schools and districts. In addition, HEA and NCLBA grants are funded differently, with HEA funds distributed through one-time competitive grants, while Title II under NCLBA provides funds annually to all states through a formula.

Both acts provide states, districts, or grantees with the flexibility to use funds for a broad range of activities to improve teacher quality, including many activities that are similar, such as professional development and recruitment. A difference is that NCLBA’s Title II specifies that teachers can be hired to reduce class-size while HEA does not specifically mention class-size reduction. Districts chose to spend about one-half of their NCLBA Title II funds on class-size reduction in 2004-2005. On the other hand, professional development and recruitment efforts were the two broad areas where recipients used funds for similar activities, although the specific activities varied somewhat. Many HEA grantees we visited used their funds to fill teacher shortages in urban schools or recruit teachers from nontraditional sources, such as mid-career professionals. Districts we visited used NCLBA funds to provide bonuses, advertise open teaching positions, and attend recruitment events, among other activities.

Under both HEA and NCLBA, Education has provided assistance and guidance to recipients of these funds and is responsible for holding recipients accountable for the quality of their activities. GAO’s previous work identified areas where Education could improve its assistance on teacher quality efforts and more effectively measure the results of these activities. Education has made progress in addressing GAO’s concerns by disseminating more information to recipients, particularly on teacher quality requirements, and improving how the department measures the results of teacher quality activities by establishing definitions and performance targets under HEA.

While HEA and NCLBA share the goal of improving teacher quality, it is not clear the extent to which they complement each other. States, districts, schools, and grantees under both laws engage in similar activities. However, not much is known about how well, if at all, these two laws are aligned. Thus, there may be opportunities to better understand how the two laws are working together at the federal, state, and local level.