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EDITORIAL

What Louisiana Can Teach

For students to learn, they need well-trained teachers. Unfortunately, far too many teacher-preparation programs in this country are little more than diploma mills. As states and the federal government consider ways to fix this problem, they should look to Louisiana's accountability-based reform efforts.

Louisiana already has required public- and private-teacher-education programs to offer more rigorous course work, and teachers must pass licensing exams in more subject areas than before.

The most striking innovation is an evaluation system that judges teacher-preparation programs based on how much their graduates improve student performances in important areas, including reading, math and science.

Once the evaluation system is in place throughout the state, officials would be able to determine which programs are turning out first-class teachers and which ones still need work. Just as important, local school districts would know which institution's graduates to avoid and which ones to hire for which subjects.

This year's report, released earlier this month, gives high marks to the teacher-preparation program at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. The report is especially flattering to The New Teacher Project. The private certification program, which works in other states as well, puts highly qualified college graduates through 12 to 18 months of additional training before placing them in schools.

According to the Louisiana report, new teachers from The New Teacher Project were more effective at teaching math, reading and language arts than others with two or more years of experience. A significant proportion of the project's Louisiana teachers were sent by Teach for America, an increasingly popular nonprofit group that recruits high-achieving, young college graduates expressly for placement in schools that are difficult to staff.

The Louisiana findings echo a study earlier this year showing that Teach for America participants who worked in North Carolina between 2000 and 2006 had a more positive impact on student performance than traditional teachers. The difference was evident in several areas of science and was strongest in math. The findings suggest that high-quality programs like Teach for America and The New Teacher Project have a big role to play in the effort to improve teacher preparation nationally.

Louisiana should be especially commended for pressing ahead with these reforms despite the trauma and destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina. Students throughout the country deserve a chance to learn from teachers who are truly prepared.