High School Students' Perspectives on the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act's Definition of a Highly Qualified Teacher

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In this article, four urban high school students and their student leadership and social justice class advisor address the question, "What are high school students' perspectives on the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act's (NCLB) definition of a highly qualified teacher?" As the advisor to the course, Garcia challenged her students to examine their high school experiences with teachers. The students offer personal stories that describe what they consider the critical qualities of teachers — qualities not based solely on the credentials and education status defined by NCLB. The authors suggest that highly qualified teachers should cultivate safe, respectful, culturally sensitive, and responsive learning communities, establish relationships with students' families and communities, express their high expectations for their students through instructional planning and implementation, and know how students learn. This article urges educators and policymakers to consider the students' voices and school experiences when making decisions about their educational needs, including the critical issue of teacher quality.

Five years after President George W. Bush signed into law the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) — the most comprehensive education reform legislation since the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act — the ma-

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jority of Americans are aware of the federal government's efforts to address the needs of all students in the public school system. The legislation details, for example, the level to which educators must raise test scores, the standards for measuring school progress, and who will be held accountable for achieving that progress. NCLB also focuses on highly qualified teachers and how to prepare, train, recruit, and support them. But the media and legal discourse concerning NCLB does little to further the public's understanding of how teacher quality affects students. Few policymakers and educators consult students about their daily realities in school. In anticipation of the reauthorization of NCLB, this article presents the experiences that four high school students from the Student Leadership and Action (SLA) course at an urban high school had with their teachers and, more importantly, describes what matters to them in defining highly qualified teachers.[1]

This article addresses the following: How can high school students inform and influence (1) local and national legislation in a way that expands current government definitions about what makes teachers "highly qualified"; (2) teacher education programs; and (3) instructional practice and professional development in order to improve and equalize performance and overall school success for all students? These four high school students wrote letters to their teachers about their school experiences, sharing their perspectives on what it means to be a highly qualified teacher and to teach in a highly qualified manner. They also suggested how educators could expand the current NCLB definition of qualified teachers.

The article begins with background information on SLA and an overview of the students' letter-writing process. This is followed by a discussion about the importance of considering students' perspectives on issues of teacher quality and the students' letters. The article concludes with an analysis of the letters and the influence the students' definitions of a highly qualified teacher have on policies related to teacher quality, teacher education, and instructional practice.

The students featured in this article are advocating for social change through their letters to teachers and with stories about the ways federal education legislation has affected their school experiences. They studied the issue of teacher quality and redefined it for themselves in the context of their education. This article is a rare opportunity for their voices to be heard. The students hope that the educators who read these letters will reflect on teachers who were instrumental (or not) in their own lives, and then consider how adults and youth can work together to make the issue of teacher quality responsive to all students' needs.

The Vision and Development of Student Leadership and Action

If academic performance is to improve for all students, and if teacher quality is a key component in that improvement, then educators and policymakers

must recognize the role of youth in school improvement efforts. They must attend in particular to the voices of students from groups and communities that have been marginalized historically when it comes to decisions about their educational needs. The statements and beliefs of young people serve as the guiding principle of SLA and explain why the topic of teacher quality resonates with SLA students. SLA is a credit-bearing social studies elective in which students conduct participatory action research (PAR) on school issues, questioning and seeking real solutions while also developing key academic and critical literacies (e.g., critical thinking, reading, writing, and analysis, see Morrell, 2004a, 2004b, for discussion).[2] Beginning in their junior year, the SLA students and their classmates discussed the purpose of education in connection to themes of history, social justice, research, and community organizing.

The PAR framework is a key component of SLA because it allows students to have an active role in the change process while encouraging them to maintain a strong commitment to their schoolwork. Merrifield (1997) discusses three important components of PAR: participation, action, and knowledge. This framework allows those who "would traditionally be the subject of research to decide what problems are worth investigating" (Merrifield, p. 3). PAR establishes a framework in which students act as both researchers and researched. They are involved in the entire research process, and their own daily realities drive the issues and questions they want to examine. PAR is empowering because it raises the critical consciousness of those whose voices have been historically silenced and excluded from power long held by elites. It allows for the assumption that "knowledge is alive, rooted in social relations, and most powerful when produced collaboratively through community-based social action" (Fine et al., 2001, p. 1). Through this work, students are trying to change the way adults — teachers, administrators, and other educators who are making decisions and policies that have an impact on their education — think about the role of youth in defining and shaping their own high school experiences.

Since graduating from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 2002, I have been working with high school youth in the Northeastern city of Metropolis. My efforts are focused on participatory action and critical research methods as part of the youth voice and engagement strand within the Metropolis Public School (MPS) District's High School Reform Initiative (HSR).[3] The twin goals of HSR are (1) to improve classroom instruction; and (2) to develop and sustain positive relationships between students and teachers, students and students, and students and adults from the broader school community. I work with the Metropolis Education Partners (MEP), a close organizational partner of MPS, whose mission is to support the district in transforming instruction to improve student performance.

Last year, MEP recognized the need to integrate the concepts and strategies of critical and action research at the classroom level more fully, so that

academic achievement and critical literacies would become explicit goals for working with students as researchers. MEP partnered with Academy High, an urban high school established in 1841, to pilot SLA, since the school had already been working with students as action researchers. Academy High's mission is to provide personalized and connected learning for all students that leads to postsecondary education. It enrolls just over 1,200 students, 83 percent of whom qualify for free and reduced-price school lunch. The majority of students are Black (47%) and Latino (40%), and the students come from all neighborhoods of the city. The staff demographics are 65 percent White, 19 percent Black, and 14 percent Latino. The school, which is organized into three small learning communities, has partnerships with local colleges and universities, hospitals, and other community organizations that support career experiences for students in professions such as health, law, business, and media arts and communications. The partnership with MEP was an opportunity for the high school to deepen its previous work with students, have more personnel and financial support in the process of student-led change efforts, and develop a rigorous college-level course that examines public education at local and national levels. The result has been the creation of a safe space where students freely discuss the educational inequities in urban schooling that have persisted over time in terms of resource allocation, quality of facilities, discipline policies, and other areas. But the issue that generates the greatest debate, passion, and emotion is what it means to be a good teacher.

The Letter-Writing Process with Students

> I wanted to do this project not only for the experience of improving my writing but also I think that the students' voice is not always heard entirely, even through dialogue. I feel that by doing this journal we can make a difference with our personal experience and touch the heart of someone who is willing to stand by us. I also wanted to get the attention of other students who may be feeling the same frustration I have felt.
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> — *Rashida Registe, SLA student*

All students in the SLA class had a chance to participate in this intense and exciting writing project. The four students profiled in this article were able to commit to the project for four months. This project required a significant amount of their time; they attended weekly afterschool meetings and completed various writing assignments in addition to their regular schoolwork. The decision to engage in letter writing was sparked by one student's writing assignment that was part of this project (a letter to a teacher), but also was inspired by Paulo Freire's (1998) book, *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach.* In this book, Freire offers ten letters he wrote to teachers. Each addresses a different concept or aspect of teaching and challenges teachers to think critically about their role as learners, not just as individuals imparting knowledge. The students wanted a powerful and critical method,

like the letters in Freire's book, for "speaking" to teachers about how they could learn from students about how best to meet their students' needs. Writing letters also allowed students to express their experiences in a personal way, and ultimately stimulated a rethinking of NCLB's definition of a highly qualified teacher.

The students devoted a significant amount of time to this project in order to develop their ideas about the four key characteristics of a highly qualified teacher, which they discuss in the letters that follow. This process occurred over several months of required weekly meetings, readings, writing assignments, and research that included the following components:

- *Understanding NCLB legislation.* The students had all heard about NCLB from the media, but were not aware of any specific policies. After reading about NCLB, several of them searched the MPS website on their own to find the percentage of highly qualified teachers in other Metropolis schools and districts. As they learned more about NCLB, they began to feel excluded from the process of developing education policy because they realized that students' voices had not been considered, which was evident in NCLB's academic focus and inattention to other criteria that matter to students.
- *Reviewing education literature.* In addition to information on NCLB, the students read education literature that discussed teacher quality and addressed issues of race, culture, language, pedagogy, and student–teacher relationships. It was important for them to analyze how their own experiences had been affected by these other factors. One article the students read was called "Getting to the Heart of Quality Teaching," which appeared in the *Rethinking Schools* Special Edition entitled "Improving Teacher Quality" (Winter 2005–2006). The students were particularly drawn to the elements of quality teaching that the authors, Au et al., defined as "grounded in the lives of our students; critical; multicultural, antiracist, pro-justice; participatory, experiential; hopeful, visionary; activist; academically rigorous; and culturally and linguistically sensitive" (2005–2006, p. 7). The students discussed with one another whether these factors mattered to them in what they considered a highly qualified teacher. They shared stories of their own relationships with teachers or those of their peers. They all felt that teaching should be grounded in students' lives but had different ideas of what that would look like in practice.
- *Analyzing their learning experiences.* The students had to describe powerful moments or experiences when they really learned something, positive or negative, from someone else — from anybody, not just a schoolteacher. This process allowed the students to name the key qualities present or absent in the teachers who had taught them significant lessons in their lives. They then had to consider what teacher qualities would allow replication of these positive learning experiences for other young people.

- *Grounding their experiences in local education strategies.* The students further examined their experiences using the Metropolis Public School's "Principles of Teaching" (see Table 1). This document publicly states key criteria and expectations for the district's teachers and what they should know and do beyond their credentials to meet the needs of all students. Though approved in February 2006, this document is a first step in developing a comprehensive, multidimensional view of effective teaching. This public document helped the students conceptualize their ideas within the context of their own school district.

Why Consider Students' Perspectives

> A highly qualified teacher to me means that they have more to offer to the students. They also know the meaning of the importance of students' education. It is a teacher who knows when they are wrong and are willing to work harder for themselves. This is just what I think defines them. But it [NCLB definition] really means for a teacher to pass a standardized test in the state.
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> — *Fidias Pina, SLA student*

The high school student's definition of a highly qualified teacher speaks to the personal and interpersonal qualities of teachers; however, the federal government's definition focuses on academic credentials such as content knowledge and training. In their letters to teachers, the students described what they feel are the critical qualities of teachers, which differ greatly from the NCLB criteria. Each letter touched on the roles culture and relationships play in defining highly qualified teachers, how teachers can teach beyond their academic qualifications, and how academic achievement is affected by certain teacher qualities. The students' letters showed that *their* definition of a highly qualified teacher is someone who

- cultivates safe, respectful, and culturally sensitive and responsive learning communities
- establishes relationships with families and communities
- expresses their high expectations for students by planning challenging and engaging instruction
- knows how students learn and is skilled at helping them do so

High school students have a lot to say about what makes a teacher highly qualified. When you ask them to think about their greatest teachers, they tell you not about degrees or credentials, but about teachers who pushed them to think critically, held them to high expectations with challenging work, knew their family members, and acknowledged and valued their identities, communities, and histories by making classroom lessons relevant to their everyday lives. However, they will also tell you about the teachers who, though by academic definition are "qualified," stifle student learning in the classroom. These teachers made hurtful or embarrassing remarks about a student's com-

TABLE 1 *Metropolis Public Schools Principles of Teaching*

- Equity and high expectations
- Professionalism
- Safe, respectful, culturally sensitive, and responsive learning communities
- Creating partnerships with family and community
- Instructional planning and implementation
- Content knowledge
- Monitoring and assessment of progress
- Reflection, collaboration, and personal growth

*Adopted by the Metropolis School Committee, February 1, 2006

munity or identity in class, or remained silent when others made such remarks. Such teachers told them they were not smart enough to go to college, made assumptions about them based on how they dressed, acted, or talked, never reached out to their parents or guardians, and effectively pushed them out of school.

If students need teachers who have the positive qualities described previously, then the NCLB definition misses the mark by focusing only on academic characteristics and not on those qualities needed to provide deeply engaging and meaningful school experiences for students. In her interview in the *Rethinking Schools* Special Edition, scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings addresses this issue:

> If students come away from a class not really having learned to do some basic things like how to think and problem solve and make decisions, then I don't see how you can call it highly qualified. I know people don't want to say that the teacher is responsible for this, that, and the other, but how do we justify our place in the society if indeed it is not our responsibility to help kids learn? I don't even think there is anything you can say on paper about that teacher that can be the sole determiner of highly qualified teaching. Highly qualified teaching is intimately tied to results, but I'm not talking about results on standardized tests. (Au, 2005–2006, p. 37)

This challenge by Ladson-Billings speaks to a broader vision of education: the role of teachers (and their teaching) to fully prepare all students to participate and be engaged by the academic, social, and political demands of society. Expecting a teacher's role to include social responsibility requires a different perspective and conversation about the purpose of teaching and what it means for student achievement, beyond standardized tests. These statements by Ladson-Billings also raise important questions on the issue of teacher quality: Can one assume that a highly qualified teacher (by NCLB standards) teaches in a highly qualified manner? What is highly qualified teaching? What other qualities, skills, or knowledge are essential to being highly qualified? How do these teachers act? What is their pedagogy? Teach-

er characteristics and pedagogy are inherently connected. In our conversations with students, the way highly qualified teachers taught or acted did not always align with what students needed. For example, students said a highly qualified teacher was someone who held them to high expectations. Yet students also said some of their highly qualified teachers, by NCLB standards, never gave homework, or gave homework that consisted of worksheets requiring little thought or effort. The relatedness of these two concepts — being a highly qualified teacher by definition and actually teaching in a highly qualified manner — is evident throughout the students' experiences. Their letters, which follow in the next section, also highlight the role of two other factors: culture and relationships.

Creating Partnerships with Family and Community

WILHEMINA AGBEMAKPLIDO, *Junior*

I have come a long way, seen a lot of things, and learned many lessons. My humanity and my experiences make me who I am. I read to hide from the world but I write to relate to it through poetry, music, literature, and painting. I take the world's most sensitive creations and perfect them by presenting to the world the true nature of my artistic soul. A community makes you who you are, but I also make my community what it is. I came into this world with my own point of view. My arrogance and my imperfections are the lenses through which I see the world. The art of simply being alive each day and relating to the world inspires me to be more and do more. My dedication to my academics and ambition toward my future success make me willing to help others succeed. Who am I? I have yet to touch the core of my being. This is my story. Read it to get to know me and to help me know myself.

Dear New Teacher,

I congratulate you for choosing to become a teacher. A teacher is a builder of nations — they stand on the sidelines of history and inspire whole civilizations. But teaching does not only happen in classrooms and schools. It happens every day without books and chalkboards. A great teacher in my life was my grandfather Nicholas Nyabi. He was the world's best teacher who didn't have a teacher's degree but did have a very unassuming way of teaching. He was patient, had endless compassion, and always had a smile on his face. I have learned a lot of lessons from him, and I want to share one of the most poignant lessons with you so you understand the qualities of a great teacher in my eyes.

I lived in Cement, Ghana, until I was about fourteen years old. One day when I was about nine years old, I was walking with my grandfather in my village. The sun had just set, covering everything with a cool blanket, harsh rays

fading into the soft and warm clouds. My grandfather and I had a habit of taking walks around this time to reflect on our day. Sundown is the socializing hour in my village, when everyone comes back from their farms and occupations. The adults sit around talking and occasionally sharing funny anecdotes about their children and telling their grandchildren Ananse stories. Ananse stories are morality tales that have been passed down from generations before us and contain life lessons.

On this day we walked passed a group of Ewe (an ethnic group) women of Cement who were talking about a wedding they attended in Obusi, a nearby village. The women were appalled by the cooking methods of the Obusi women, who used a lot of salt instead of using spices and onions like we do. The women laughed about how superior the Ewes of Cement were compared to the Ewes of Obusi. My grandfather turned to me with a very intense look on his face and in a low voice said, "Wilhemina, these women are speaking from narrow points of view. They have not seen enough of the world to confirm their cultural superiority. The only reason why the Ewe women of Cement speak this way is because they lack education and have not traveled and seen the world. Only the educated are free and you must travel the world before you can know it and be familiar with it." That day I made a vow to educate myself so I would not be bound by narrow points of view. My grandfather's words gave me a passion to travel and meet new people. Then I can know different information from every culture on earth, becoming a well-learned person and a better one at that.

My grandfather was a great teacher because he commanded my love, respect, and admiration; all teachers should have these qualities. I need more schoolteachers like my grandfather, teaching life lessons and educating people to be free of prejudice. In my village there is a proverb that says, "It takes a whole village to raise a child." Teachers are treated as family. That's why I think to me, highly qualified teachers should have a personal connection with students and their families. I remember elementary and middle school in Ghana, when teachers knew my parents and I felt like I had a second family in school. But then I came to the United States for high school and that kind of communication and relationship stopped. There are no phone calls to my house from my teachers. They make no efforts to involve my parents in my school life. My parents feel disconnected from the school because they have no idea what is happening in my class or how they can help. I feel all alone in school.

However, in the Principles of Teaching, a Metropolis Public Schools document outlining key teacher qualities, one principle is called "Creating Partnerships with Family and Community." This principle states that teachers should "initiate and maintain consistent communication and develop constructive partnerships with families, community members, and agencies, building on their strengths and recognizing them as co-educators." This document de-

scribes teachers' responsibility to have regular communication with students and families better than NCLB's definition of a highly qualified teacher, which does not mention personal connections with anyone.

NCLB's definition of highly qualified says only that a teacher must possess a bachelor's degree; be certified in the subjects and/or grades they teach; be licensed to teach in the state; demonstrate subject knowledge and teaching skills; and, must not be teaching with an emergency, temporary, or provisional license. NCLB's definition also only recognizes the teacher as the main educator of students, but MPS understands that students have other teachers in their lives. Family members like my grandfather teach us life lessons all the time, so shouldn't they be recognized as educators too? Should academic excellence and credentials weigh more than personal connections? Teachers deserve respect because their jobs are the foundation upon which every civilization is built. We wouldn't have any professions if there were no teachers — there would be no doctors, lawyers, or even teachers. I do not see teachers as different from my family members because teachers shape your character in the same way that your family does. Your family teaches you how to ride a bicycle and teachers teach you how to write essays; both lessons are essential to your character and growth. And sometimes as young adults we even spend more time with our teachers than we do with our families.

I believe that the teacher-certification tests gauge knowledge about particular subjects, but tests and credentials do not reflect the nature of the person. A very intelligent person, for example, is not necessarily friendly or the right type of person to work with children. As a new teacher, I advise you to start talking to students and their families to build relationships with them. Help families feel comfortable coming to you when their child has problems, because sometimes situations at home affect a student's performance in school. If you regularly talk to families you might know how to handle these kinds of situations. Being fluent in more than one language, for example, will help you do this. Many of my peers speak English as a second language and most of their family members do not speak English. You will have difficulty communicating with students and their families if there is a language barrier. Reaching out to families and making contact with them is how you know if they come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

I put myself through weeks of research, writing, and rewriting this letter because I wanted to find out about the policies that affected my education. As a student researcher and activist, I felt that it was my responsibility to change unfair and unjust educational policies that prevent students, especially in public schools, from receiving the best education. When I set out to do this project, I had no idea I would uncover information about the certification tests required to become a highly qualified teacher or the Principles of Teaching that MPS has outlined as key to improving student performance. But this project has given me the hope and courage to believe that my voice will be

heard in the implementation of new and improved education policies, because my peers and I in the public schools deserve an equal education and the same opportunities to have highly qualified teachers as wealthy kids in private or suburban schools.

Without an education and the skills that it provides, I would not have my voice heard even if it is passionate. The last thing I want to do when protesting an injustice is to be illiterate or unsure of myself because if I am, it belittles the value of what I have to say. That is why my grandfather said that "only the educated are free." Listen to my words, new teachers. Consider my advice, because the survival of our civilization and students depends on you.

Yours sincerely,

Wilhemina Agbemakplido

High Expectations and Instructional Planning and Implementation

HANAN ABDELLA, *Senior*

> The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think — rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with thoughts of other men.
>
> — *Bill Beattie*

Dear Ms. Keller,

I am currently a student in your twelfth-grade English class, but here are some things you may not know about me. I am eighteen years old and moved to the United States when I was four years old. I was born in Sudan, but both my parents are from Ethiopia. I am a Muslim and I have four sisters and five brothers. I live with two sisters, two brothers, and a single mother. Although I am a shy and quiet person, I am very friendly. I work hard inside and outside of school. English is my favorite subject because I love reading and writing about different subjects; I feel like I'm in a different world whenever I read or write. I plan on going to college to continue my education, studying to become an English teacher.

I want you to know that I plan to become an English teacher because I love working with kids and I want to help them succeed in life. I believe that students should have an opportunity to become whatever they want, but they need a little push to help them get started. This is why the role of teachers is so important. I also want to be an English teacher because I want to get rid of low expectations that other teachers have for students and set high expec-

tations for all students. I think highly qualified teachers must have high expectations for their students by planning good lessons and involving students in planning. It's been said that a picture is worth a thousand words, so I'd like to first describe how I see your class and then how I wish you would run your class. I want you to understand the difference between your class and my ideal class.

Scene One: A Typical Day in English Class, Tuesday, 12:20 P.M.

When I walk into English class, there are only two students in the classroom; the tables are set up in a U-shape. The room is not organized, your desk is messy, and the room has trash everywhere. There is one TV in the back of the room. The room smells like scented board markers. I walk to my seat and wait for you to get everyone settled in the classroom. After more students arrive, you ask us to read our independent reading book for about 25 minutes. Some of us do what you ask while you work on your computer. Then three students get kicked out because they didn't do what you wanted them to do, they were talking back, or maybe you were just having a bad day. We don't have a journal to write about our books and you do not ask us what we are reading during this time. When independent reading time is over, you tell us to take out our Hamlet books. We read Hamlet as a class for the rest of the period. While we are reading, we have to take notes about what is happening or write summaries in our Hamlet notebook. You tell us what you think about the text and what is happening in the play. Most often, we simply write what you tell us to write. This happens every single day. Class is over and you didn't assign any homework — you rarely do.

Scene Two: IDEAL English class, Tuesday, 12:20 P.M.

I walk into English class with a couple of my classmates in front of me. We take our seats. The tables are set up in a U-shape. The room is very organized — even your desk — and there is no trash on the floor. There is one TV in the back of the room. The room smells like scented board markers. You walk in and wait a little bit for the rest of the students to come in. You tell everyone to read independently and to write in his or her journal after reading. You wait until everyone begins reading, and then go around talking with students about their books. You ask questions like, "Is the book interesting?" or "Do you understand what is going on?" When reading time is over, you tell us to take out our homework so you can check it. After checking our homework, you ask us to take out our Hamlet books. We read and take notes about what is going on in the play. You don't tell us what is happening but let us figure it out. We talk about the text as a class. You lead the discussion, but we all share our ideas about the book. Sometimes, if we are confused, you give us clues or teach us strategies that help us figure out what is happening. You give us a handout with a list of soliloquies from Hamlet, and you try to help us under-

stand each one. At the end of the paper, we answer a few questions that help us analyze the pattern of the soliloquies and Hamlet's thinking. Then you hand us our homework, with enough time remaining in class for us to ask any questions we have about the book or homework. Rinnngggg. Class ends.

The first scene depicts what happens in our English class every day, but scene two is what I wish would happen in our English class. The following describes my perspectives:

1. Students need to be engaged. In the first scene, three students got kicked out because they were not engaged. I think it was because the lesson plan was boring. In scene two, the teacher knew what she was doing and had everything organized. So the students were engaged in the lesson. They were answering and asking questions, doing their work, writing in their journal, etc. Also in the first scene, you were on your computer during independent reading time, while in scene two, the teacher walked around the classroom to talk to us about how we are doing with our independent reading book.
2. Kids learn by talking, which changes the role of being a student to that of being co-learners and co-teachers. In scene one, you tell us what to write and what to think. There is no student voice in the class at all. But in my ideal English class, the teacher gives us a chance to say what we think. If you lecture throughout the period and do not allow us to discuss what we are reading with each other, we are not going to really understand what is going on. Then we get bored and stop listening.
3. In scene one, you were not well prepared for class. We do the same lesson plan every day, nothing new. In my ideal class, we would do different things every day to help us learn such things as completing class activities, studying, and doing homework, discussing independent reading with the teacher and other students, and engaging in writing assignments and projects. When you are prepared for class, it shows us you took time to think through what you wanted us to learn before giving us an assignment. We know that you are ready to teach and know what you are doing when you come into the classroom.
4. We need homework. In my ideal class, the teacher would give us homework at least four days of the week. Sometimes we need to learn how to do things on our own and I know that we could use this practice for when we get into college. Students come to school to learn and if they don't gain new knowledge, they've wasted seven hours of their life. In your class you judge us by not giving us any homework because you think we probably will not do it.
5. Students need to be challenged with work. In our current class, you baby us by assuming we can't do the work without giving us a chance to try. Challenging work is important because if you give us easy work, we won't

take our education seriously. Being able to complete difficult work that you assign would better prepare us for college. We don't want to be behind other students who could be better than us academically. I want to feel like I'm at their level.

So which scene is an example of a highly qualified teacher? What do *you* think makes a high-qualified teacher? Do you think that passing a teacher-certification test or coming to school every day makes you highly qualified? I don't think so! I think a highly qualified teacher is someone like the person described in scene two — someone with high expectations who can plan lessons and teach them well. When teachers harbor low expectations of students, they will not be focused, won't come to class, and will probably end up dropping out of school. A friend of mine dropped out of school during her senior year because she felt like no one really cared whether she graduated or not. If she had teachers who really cared about her and her education, she would not have dropped out. She was one of those students who needed that push to get started and keep going, but no one was there to lift her up and believe in her.

As a teacher, you need to be sure all your students are engaged and to figure out how to engage them when they are not. You can tell that students are not engaged in classroom activities when they refuse to do assignments or just aren't doing the work; it's probably because they don't understand the assignment. It is important you know what you are doing as a teacher and also as a learner, because you do not just teach by telling people what you know or think. Everyone learns new things everyday and learning expands your mind. Learning can be about many things such as religion or beliefs, but overall, being a learner will help you become a better critical thinker. Regardless of whether you are a new teacher or someone who has been teaching for a long time, you must also learn from your students. I want teachers to learn from me by taking time to talk to me and being comfortable with me. Teachers should try to understand the way I do things or act and how I learn best. Doing these things will help you know what your students need.

I want to be the kind of teacher who has high expectations, strong lesson plans every day, and positive interactions with my students about their work. I believe that we need more teachers like the one in scene two, to support us in everything. Writing this letter to you makes me feel better because now I feel like a whole weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I hope my suggestions will help you become a better teacher.

Sincerely,

Hanan Abdella

Monitoring Assessment and Progress

OSCAR LOPEZ Jr., *Junior*

Dear New Teacher,

My name is Oscar. I am a sixteen-year-old student whose ethnic background is Guatemalan. I go to Academy High in the Metropolis Public Schools. Because of my ethnicity and where I come from, people expect me to fail in America's school system and not stand a chance in postsecondary education. I am a minority. Every day I trudge my usual route to my school with its barred windows and two tall east and west watchtowers, which seem to signal that there is no means of escape. To top it off, adults make you feel like a convicted felon walking by the metal detector that is placed near the entrance of our supposed school. I walk up the hill and look into my fellow peers' faces. I see nothing but dread and a calm rage for the school they have to go to but do not want to face. It is not a school devoted to seeing all of my peers go on to higher education.

In spite of my school environment, I still see myself as an achiever. I want a better life for myself, so I go to all my classes day after day. I do the best I can to show others that I am not a statistic. America already assumes I won't amount to much. So every day I prove to America's school system that I am not just a statistic. It's important for you to know that in this type of setting, where student dropout rates steadily increase, the nation assumes there is little hope for any type of excellence to grow from where nothing is. I like to prove people wrong because there's always hope no matter what. I see hope every day in my English class, where the students are happy to learn and the teacher is more than willing to teach. It's because of my teacher, Mr. M, who in my view is a highly qualified teacher.

But first, in order for you to understand me a little better and what I think makes a highly qualified teacher, I want to tell you a story about one of my greatest teachers — my dad, who I also call my Superman. He has taught me lessons in ways that made learning fun and easy. I remember one day as a young boy of just eight years of age, I opened my huge wooden front door and saw my Superman dad. He's a tall brown man of 200 pounds, with a mustache on his face that wiggles whenever he smiles, and he wore his grand costume of a white T-shirt, black jeans, and cowboy boots. Whenever I saw my dad lift something (that at the time looked enormous to my eight-year-old frail body yearning to be as strong as he was), he made it look as light as a feather. It made my brother and me strive to be that impressive.

That hot sunny afternoon in front of our apartment building he gave us a surprise and planted it right in front of our stoop — two brand new bikes! I noticed something about both bikes: my bike had no training wheels, but my older brother's had a pair. My dad later told me that he had purposely left the training wheels off so I could learn how to ride a bike the hard way. I stood

there with my mouth sealed tight and my eyes wide open, making my little face (what I do when I feel uncomfortable about anything) and not moving a single muscle towards that bike of wonder. The lesson from my Superman was, "Things don't come easy to anyone; you need to practice to get it right." I didn't disappoint my Superman that day because I tried to ride my wonder on wheels. Each day my dad would take out my bike and put it in front of our stoop in case my brother or I wanted to ride again, but it would be our choice. My father knew I wouldn't give up and it was just a matter of how clever he had to be in order to push me, instead of giving up on me and my potential. This taught me that with determination, a little practice, and a willingness to get a little scraped and bruised, anything is possible.

One person who has been my Superman in school has been Mr. M. He is the ideal teacher. We need more teachers like Mr. M in the Metropolis Public School system. Just like my dad had tools to help me reach my potential, Mr. M can sense when students are in need of help or having trouble with their work. It's as if he has some invisible "student radar" that he purchased from the local RadioShack electronics store. For the students at Academy High, this radar is the ideal tool for any teacher who, by the MPS standards, is considered a highly qualified teacher. This radar will help any teacher read students' body language, make them more alert to students' needs, and pick up each student's individual frequency when they are (or are not) paying attention.

Recently in class we read *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and if you have ever read any of her works, you know that each sentence contains many messages that you do not get from reading it only once. An example: "Nuns go by as quiet as lust, and drunken men and sober eyes sing in the lobby of the Greek hotel." From first glance, my peers and I really only understood that nuns were walking by and drunken men with sober eyes are in the lobby of a Greek hotel. But that is not what Mr. M saw. He went deeper into the text to understand what the author tried to convey to the reader. Mr. M asked us questions like, "How do you analyze the writer's style?" "Why do you think this writing style is appropriate for the story?" "Why do you think the characters behave in a certain way?" As we discussed this text, I remember seeing Mr. M also do several other things simultaneously: he wrote on the board, listened to the conversation we had about the book, explained quickly what he wrote on the board, and then went to the students he saw who were "not getting it." After hearing Mr. M analyze this particular sentence, I realized that Morrison is a very descriptive writer because she uses a lot of adjectives. It is easy to get lost in the rhythm of her writing and how she uses words to describe her emotions.

Mr. M also used his invisible student radar when we had to write a paper on the book *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. During this writing process, Mr. M met with each student individually to give feedback about the paper. He would kneel in front of the student's desk and talk about the paper

until he knew that student was comfortable enough to finish writing. It was as if his invisible student radar told him when the student was ready to work independently before he moved along to the next student. When I met with Mr. M I had trouble starting with my main ideas. He told me to separate all my brainstorm ideas because it would help me start my body paragraphs. If I still didn't feel comfortable with the process, to go back and brainstorm more ideas to help me. His advice helped me focus on organizing my thoughts so that my paper would flow.

But not all teachers have the invisible student radar. My math teacher, Mr. NoClue, does not use any tools when teaching me or my peers. Rather, he gives us problems, expects us to get it right away, and then moves on. One day in math we were going over quadratic equations and I could tell by the confused looks on some of the students' faces that they did not understand the lesson. But instead of just going over the areas that were confusing, Mr. NoClue dumbed down the entire question to make it easier for the class to answer. Mr. NoClue said, "If you got this equation (the easier one) then you should be able to get the one you don't know." He couldn't read the expressions on the students' faces saying, "We just don't get it." Mr. NoClue needs this invisible student radar because he doesn't understand his students and that they still don't get some lessons even if the work is simplified. Some students are uncomfortable expressing to teachers when they don't understand what's going on in the lesson. Some students just feel dumb confronting their problems in front of their peers.

If Mr. NoClue took a couple of teaching lessons from Mr. M, maybe Mr. NoClue would be able to read his students' body language and go through his lessons plan a little slower. He might also learn how walking around the classroom to check on his students' work is helpful because it gives students the individual attention they need. Mr. M, unlike Mr. NoClue, can use his radar to read our needs as well as our potential to be successful. This is the ideal teaching tool because it tells Mr. M when students are having difficulty with the material and they don't even have to ask for help.

I think the invisible student radar shows how much Mr. M cares about us and our future. Mr. M gets angry like a parent when we don't perform as well as he knows we can. He gives us what we need to hear about our education without pampering us about it. Because he knows we can do better, he won't let us waste our potential by not working. Knowing I have a teacher who believes in me has taught me to always do my best because I might not have another chance. Mr. M has been a true inspiration in my life and I want him to be proud to have me as his student. I look forward to his class when I get to school, and when I'm there my day gets a little better. So what if all teachers in Academy High had this invisible student radar to read each of their students? Students wouldn't have to worry about "getting it" because their teacher would already sense they need help. The invisible student radar is a tool that is developed over time and does not come to a teacher over night.

To develop this tool, I think teachers should observe other classes to learn better how to meet students' needs. One way to get feedback from *students* would be to take time regularly to talk to your students about how the lessons went. But, in order to make this work, you must be open to constructive criticism from students. In classes like this, then truly no child would ever be left behind and students like me wouldn't become just another statistic.

Sincerely,

Oscar Lopez

Safe, Respectful, Culturally Sensitive, and Responsive Learning Communities

RASHIDA T. REGISTE, *Junior*

"To be or not to be?" I choose "not to be" because it is better to be what has not been than to be what is. My voice is hardly heard, therefore I am vaguely seen. Who am I? I am a writer, an Edgar Allan Poet, a rocker, Gothic, never the sun but always the moon. My religion incomplete, actually Agnostic. I wish I could just go around saying that I'm nothing and just strip myself of this skin and just cast my bones . . . I wonder what humans would call me? "Other" is my identity, that 0.56 on the nation's census. I am not another crayon waiting in the box for my "race" to color the world and I am not the string of the guitar hoping that my melody will be strummed. I am not the bare skin of a beating drum thundering my soul through the powerful sound. No! I am just myself, wishing to help others understand the place where I belong. My peers see me as an "Oreo" — black on the outside and white on the inside. They see me as a descendant from the African race, but I am from the exotic land of India to the colorful background of the Caribbean. I fall somewhere in between.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I would like to share my thoughts with you about the way you currently teach lessons about the Middle East and East Asia in your World History class. For example, one day we were discussing women and their place in Muslim society. One of the boys said, "Their [Muslim women] problem is that they are stupid women if they can't stand up for themselves." You agreed with him and said, "Now children, that's the difference between living in a communist country and a democratic society." After that comment you allowed the conversation to escalate and everyone began to state their personal opinions on what they called "women laziness" in Muslim society.

When we had this discussion about the role of women in the Muslim society, the unit was on the Middle East and East Asia. The timeframe was after September 11, 2001, around late October. This conversation affected my emotions as a woman because it is my responsibility to stand up for the women who do not have the same freedom I do. I felt you and the male student encouraged the class to believe that Muslim women are too lazy to fight for their rights, so they are powerless. I do not have a religion, but I have Muslim friends. Yes, some women may not experience it, but there are some who do. I feel that American and Muslim societies view women as second to males. Women are not lazy, just not given status, especially women from other cultures, so we end up feeling rejected.

This conversation really struck me in a way that I never thought was possible and I never got a chance to respond to all your comments. All I remember is that day I sunk to my lowest low; a low I never thought I had in me. A ball of anger and hatred passionately tore at my emotions. Do you really know what it feels like to wake up in the hot blazing morning every day of your life from the time of your birth, knowing you have to cover up not only your physical traits but your pride, hopes, dreams, beliefs, and identity? What about your ability to be a person in society, everything you stand for, and your freedom to speak? Do you know what it's like to live as a ghost and live in the shadows that you cast? To be abstract to the naked eye? Not to be entirely mute but to have an infinite flame of eternal silence as your voice of words? Where you are seen only as a tool of continuation, a breeding object of mankind's existence on Earth? Can you imagine the feeling of rejection? When it comes to the point where people have said you are barren and you start believing it yourself? All these questions I bestow on you, Mr. Potter, and your "democratic" class.

I have a response for you and my peers because I feel that my invisible ultraviolet voice needs to be seen and heard for once. One of *my* standards for being "highly qualified" is that you provide a safe, respectful, and open-minded environment for your students, coming to their defense as necessary, especially when they are being singled out or attacked by their peers. A qualified teacher should be able to get the class to understand diverse views and not be biased. I feel that you add your personal views in our discussions a bit too much. When you do this, it seems like your comments are talking down about another culture's way of life, who a Muslim woman is as a person, who her parents are, what her society is, and what her nation stands for.

Few people in my surroundings, such as my peers, teachers, and you, are aware of my background. My family consists of all different types of nationalities and cultures. My ancestors were *MADE IN* East India, but the main culture in my family is West Indian from the Caribbean. I say that my family was *made in* East India as my expression of my family existence. Our roots began in India with my great-grandmothers, but we branched out to the rest of the world. My grandmother grew up in the former British territory Dominica,

and my mother was born in Aruba. My brother and two sisters grew up in Dominica and I am the only one to be born in America. Many of my cousins identify as Indian. My father's side traces lineage to Asia. We also have family in Trinidad, Holland, Venezuela, France, and England. Yet if you were to take a deeper look, you would see the essence of India flowing through our blood.

I am all of these things but a lot of people don't understand who I am. This is why I say I am "other." I feel uncomfortable during our class discussions on the "dark side" of the Middle East. This makes me even more discouraged to speak up. Why? Because I feel that if I try to defend myself the ratio will be 32:1. Students should not have to feel this way or go through what I have experienced, in your classroom or in any school. Mr. Potter, did you know that for some students school is their second home? When things are going bad at home and in the outside world, they should at least know they have a refuge.

Creating a safe, respectful, culturally sensitive and responsive learning community for students is important to being a highly qualified teacher. But it takes a lot of work. As a teacher, you must have an open mind and view issues from different perspectives because it is better to enter as a teacher who has an unbiased mentality. Teaching goes two ways instead of one: teachers are students too. Teachers who are willing to learn from students will establish stronger relationships with students because it shows that you strive to explore what lurks in students' minds.

Teachers should unleash our minds and make us question and think. Mr. Potter, that day I wish you would have let the class talk with each other instead of telling us what you thought. This would have created a "friendly cultural zone" in the classroom for students to learn together. We study history so that we do not repeat mistakes of the past — injustices, cruelty, and negative treatment of people. I remember my history teacher from freshman year and every Friday he allowed us to debate topics. He let his guard down as a teacher and let us choose what "side of the line to stand on." When our voices roared through the classroom walls, we realized that was when we learned the most. My classmates gave me the nickname "RAGE" not because I was angry, but because my peers were in shock how I went from being a quiet girl in the corner to this student with a deep passion about getting her point across. We taught each other because our voices brought different perspectives, not because our teacher taught us his perspective. We learned about the richness of our differences by expressing our opinions. When you make students see things from only one perspective, you help them continue a biased mentality.

We students live outside of the school's brick walls. We come to school with our own understandings and beliefs influenced by our parents and the communities around us. But we also believe and trust in what our teachers teach us, not only as students but as young people growing up and experiencing the world. And we don't always automatically think beyond what the teacher or

the textbook says. Sometimes we are forced to decide which side of the line to stand on, or if we should stand on any side at all. Your students should feel like they can depend on you not only as their passport to the future, but also as a friend. As a highly qualified teacher, the best thing you can do is to give your students the cultural respect they crave, positive interactions with adults who understand young people, and a responsive learning community where everyone is comfortable being themselves.

> So I'm here by myself because I'm not alone.
> There are others around me.
> They wanna hear my voice
> but the voice they wanna hear,
> has no longer been in effect.
> My voice was once here but is now lost.
> It was never heard or put in doubt.
> Now all I can give are yells, screams, and shouts.
> The only voice that's heard is the one within.
> The only scream that's heard is within this skin.
> "SPEAK" is what I hear!
> "SAY SOMETHING" is engraved in my mind
> but nothing can come out.
> YES! I am screaming but with the sound off.
> YES! I am speaking but with ultra violet rays.
> YES! I am talking I've been talking for days and days
> but no one hears what I say.
> I've been talking for days and days
> But no one will ever hear me.
> It's not that I'm not talking
> I'm just . . .
> . . . FINDING MY VOICE . . .

Sincerely your student,

Rashida Registe

* * * * *

Examining What Students Say

The students' letters reflect honest, personal, and thoughtful interpretations of their school experiences. Their stories illustrate that no credential or subject-matter knowledge guarantees that a highly qualified teacher — even one with good intentions — will know how to create a classroom environment that values, respects, and builds on students' personal characteristics and backgrounds: their race, ethnicity, language, culture, gender, sexual orienta-

tion, and class. Schools and classrooms are microcosms of the larger society, spaces that bring multiracial, multilingual, and multicultural values, identities, and experiences to bear on daily routines and dynamics. This sociopolitical context of school settings and its effects on teachers is what Sonia Nieto (2000) addresses in her book *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education:*

> Most teachers are sincerely concerned about their students and want very much to provide them with the best education. But because of their own limited experiences and knowledge, they may know very little about the students they teach. As a result, their beliefs about students of diverse backgrounds may be based on spurious assumptions and stereotypes. Further, teachers are often at the mercy of decisions made by others far removed from the classroom; they generally have little to do with developing the policies and practices in their schools, and frequently they do not even question them. Teachers are also the producers of educational systems that have a history of racism, exclusion, and debilitating pedagogy. Hence their practices reflect their experiences and they may unwittingly perpetuate policies and approaches that are harmful to many of their students. (p. 5)

The four students in this article address classroom dynamics, but they also offer insights into the dynamics of the overall school environment. Classrooms exist and function within the school setting, and as each of these letters shows, improving students' school experiences requires not only highly qualified teachers and teaching, but attention to the conditions that create these teacher quality outcomes.

Rashida's and Wilhemina's letters are examples of how the dynamics of racial identity, history, and cultural beliefs intersect in classroom dialogue, relationships, and interactions with teachers. Rashida identifies herself as "other," and we see that her identity is shaped and represented by many different cultures — from those of her peers to those of her family members. Although she is not a Muslim, she reacts strongly to the class discussion about Muslim society and culture because of her friendships with Muslim students and their common experiences of being misunderstood and stereotyped. Mr. Potter's comments created divisions in the class, when students were "forced to stand on one side" on issues of Muslim culture and gender rather than coming together as learners in a culturally sensitive, respectful, and responsive learning community.

In that moment, Rashida no longer felt part of the classroom community because it was unsafe to speak out, even in the presence of her teacher. Rashida's perspective on her multicultural identity and the comments about Muslim women force us to consider what cultural competency skills, awareness, knowledge, and experiences teachers need to constructively facilitate classroom discussions on issues of culture, race, and identity. Instead of encouraging students to be reflective about the issues of race, culture, and gender, Mr. Potter actually encouraged the class to reinforce stereotypes. All teach-

ers must have opportunities to examine their own biases and assumptions so they can be better prepared to help students build character and develop into young adults who are tolerant and respectful of differences.

Like Rashida's sense of being alone in that classroom, Wilhemina's feelings of loneliness are the result of diminished value placed on the role of families and communities in student achievement. As a young child in Ghana, everyone in her community was considered an educator, and schoolteachers were valued like family members. However, this was not what she experienced at Academy High. As a result, her parents are not involved in her schooling experiences. Schools often don't recognize or perceive families and communities as "teachers," instead making the assumption that families and communities are not involved because of the narrow definitions that define parent engagement in schools. To counter these perceptions, Wilhemina feels, teachers need to do more to reach out to parents. She knows that language and racial barriers create a challenge for communicating with parents, but still believe this is a poor reason not to reach out to families.

Wilhemina's letter also illustrates the ways families and communities perceive the role of teachers and the purpose of teaching and learning. Her community shares a sense of responsibility for their children's education, in keeping with the proverb that "it takes a village to raise a child." In a recent lecture to Metropolis educators about culturally responsive practices and school achievement of students of color, Lisa Delpit (2006) said: "We [teachers] must help kids understand their place in the intellectual legacy . . . that doing well in school is more than finding a job. Teachers need to help students understand their role as educated individuals and what they can do for the greater community." Delpit's comments speak to teaching that helps students see education as a means to building a stronger community. But in order for teachers to teach for a larger purpose of community achievement, they must see themselves as part of and invested in the community of their students. When teachers hold a vision for education rooted in social responsibilities and legacies, they can then support and model for students how to give back to their communities. For Wilhemina, teachers are part of the "village," and like her grandfather and community members in Ghana, are important to fostering her love for learning and community contribution.

Hanan's experience demonstrates that highly qualified teachers must prove they are qualified by teaching in a highly qualified manner. Effective teaching, as depicted in Hanan's ideal class, requires providing well-planned and challenging instruction and having high expectations of students. Hanan notices every element of her current English classroom — the room's lack of organization, students being kicked out of class for copying each other's notes, and homework assignments that do not help them demonstrate understanding of the material. Hanan wants teachers to give her challenging work so she is prepared for college. She knows that if she is not ready for college-level work she will be academically behind her college peers. Hanan has interpreted Ms.

Keller's actions as indicative of low expectations for the class because each day is the same; her teacher does not show Hanan that she has thought deeply about what students are capable of learning and doing in class.

For Hanan, highly qualified teaching includes well-prepared lessons that not only engage students in the content but also allow them to teach one another in order to deepen their understanding of the material. Hanan's letter challenges the perspective of who teaches and where knowledge is situated. When teachers allow students to engage in dialogue with one another, it allows them to be co-learners and co-educators. However, our educational philosophies and beliefs about where learning and teaching originate have historically been viewed as only within the teacher in the school, which Paulo Freire (1970) describes as the banking concept of education:

> Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into "containers," into "receptacles" to be "filled" by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. . . . This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (pp. 71–72)

Hanan's English class was representative of the "banking" model, where students were taught Ms. Keller's ideas rather than being encouraged to form their own. But in her ideal English class, Hanan and her classmates would see themselves as co-learners and co-teachers, able to think for themselves. Adults often do not recognize young people's insights, perspectives, and knowledge about the teaching and learning process, assuming instead that adults already know the answers. Hanan says that students come to school to learn, and when they don't, it feels like they have "wasted seven hours of their life." Allowing them to be co-teachers also helps students connect and apply what they've learned to other areas of their lives. Highly qualified teachers make learning engaging, relevant, and challenging so that students see value in what they learn and are motivated to stay in school.

For Oscar, Mr. M's "invisible student radar" is the ideal teaching tool because it allows Mr. M to pay close attention to students' progress in the class and their overall understanding of the material. Mr. M is constantly discerning students' expressions and body language; sometimes students never say a word but he knows they need his help. Mr. M uses his radar to do multiple tasks: to ask critical questions during lessons, to work one-on-one with students, to facilitate discussion, and to remain aware of how students understand the material.

Mr. NoClue, however, lacks the "invisible student radar" and is not able to assess his students' learning. Oscar has made key observations about Mr. No-

Clue. He does not walk around the classroom to check on students' progress and carries out the lessons quickly. Mr. NoClue also does not pay attention to students' body language, and when students are frustrated, his response is to simplify or "dumb down" the curriculum. Though Mr. M and Mr. NoClue face the similar challenge of making sure all the students get through the content, Mr. NoClue does not scaffold the lesson in a way that maintains the rigor and high expectations for learning.

Where Do We Go from Here?

If education is to meet the needs of students like Wilhemina, Hanan, Oscar, and Rashida, the purpose, role, and vision of education must go beyond the narrow NCLB definition, which currently names only subject-matter competency. Public education must be rooted in democracy, equality, critical thinking skills, analysis, questioning — all the things that make Gloria Ladson-Billings's statement so poignant. It is important that we revisit the questions we posed at the beginning of the article: How can high school students inform and influence (1) local and national legislation in a way that expands the current government definition about what makes teachers "highly qualified"; (2) teacher education programs; and (3) instructional practice and professional development to improve and equalize student performance and overall school success? I now use these questions to discuss the broader implications and recommendations that can help foster a more comprehensive understanding of what it means to be a highly qualified teacher.

The NCLB definition of a highly qualified teacher is a public statement about what the federal government and policymakers feel is most important to issues of teacher quality. However, this definition does not make explicit the personal qualities, characteristics, and skills that these four students said teachers should have, and that they feel are critical to their academic achievement and overall school experiences. We know that students need teachers who have strong subject-matter knowledge, but these students consider a highly qualified teacher one who has a deeper sense of responsibility for student learning and achievement. The Metropolis school district and the broader education community have made various efforts to address these areas of teacher quality. Though newly created, the district's Principles of Teaching represent Metropolis's strong public statement about the kinds of qualities and skills that they want in teachers, echoing the students' call for values such as social responsibility and citizenship. The Metropolis Teacher Preparation Program (MTPP), the district's own teacher-education program, has also named a range of teacher qualities and expectations that it seeks in effective teachers. One requirement states clearly that teachers must be devoted to social justice and equity. A lecture series for the city's educators on race, culture, identity, and achievement, led by a local university, has brought expert scholars to discuss and share strategies and recommendations

to help teachers effectively teach students of color and raise their academic performance. These efforts, combined with the district's focus on student engagement as a key component of its high school improvement efforts, have pushed the school community to be more explicit about the needs that surfaced in these students' letters.

The next challenge, though, is to describe what teachers who follow the Principles of Teaching do, and to replicate those practices across *all* classrooms. If the current public definition of a highly qualified teacher was expanded to include the qualities the students named in their letters, the following would need to be considered:

- How do schools monitor how well teachers progress and practice the qualities?
- How does a teacher demonstrate they are working to achieve that quality?
- How do we describe a high standard for that quality?
- How does a teacher master certain qualities?
- What experiences do teachers need to develop these qualities?

As the reauthorization of NCLB approaches, the federal government and its policymakers should make a concerted effort to convene educators — students and adults — from school districts, higher education, community organizations, and families to offer recommendations for a more comprehensive definition of a highly qualified teacher. If the federal government does not expand its definition beyond degrees and certifications to include teaching in a highly qualified manner, then it will miss an opportunity to fully realize its goal of leaving no child behind.

Notes

1. The authors would like to thank the following individuals for their support of the students throughout this process: Stephanie Sibley, Jessica Madden-Fuoco, Courtney Williams, and Ellen Guiney.
2. Ernest Morrell of the University of California, Los Angeles, recently published two important books about the role of youth and teacher action/critical research as a means to develop students' academic and critical literacies: *Becoming Critical Researchers: Literacy and Empowerment for Urban Youth* (2004a) and *Linking Literacy and Popular Culture: Finding Connections for Lifelong Learning* (2004b). The SLA program was developed with the academic and critical literacies heavily integrated into the overall guiding principles of the work for students.
3. The names of the school district and teachers in this article are pseudonyms.

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