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Education Quality for Minorities Faulted

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WASHINGTON -- Most states have shirked the law by failing to ensure that poor and minority students get their fair share of qualified teachers, a new analysis contends.

The No Child Left Behind law says underprivileged and minority kids should not have a larger share of teachers who are unqualified, inexperienced or teaching unfamiliar topics.

It puts the responsibility on states to figure out how to do that.

States are falling far short on the promise, according to a study released Thursday by The Education Trust, a group that advocates for poor and minority kids. It is based on a review of new plans from every state and the District of Columbia.

"What we found gives cause for grave concern," said Heather Peske, one of the authors.

The report contends that states handed in vastly incomplete data, weak strategies for fixing inequities across schools, and goals so vague they can't even be measured.

All of it undermines the national effort to improve achievement, the report suggests.

The Education Department took heat, too. The report blames the agency for giving poor guidance to the states and for essentially ignoring the teacher-equity issue for four years.

"We cannot close achievement gaps if we don't close gaps in teacher quality," said Ross Wiener, policy director of The Education Trust.

A representative for state school leaders said the report misses some key points.

"This is something that states care deeply about and have been working on," said Scott Palmer, a consultant for the Council of Chief State School Officers. As examples, he said states are improving data collection and paying incentives to teachers in needy schools.

More broadly, he said, the report does not "acknowledge what an unbelievable challenge this is." Distributing teachers fairly among all students, he said, is a long-term mission.

The Education Department will release its own review of the state plans next week. Spokeswoman Katherine McLane said the agency shares the view that "much more needs to be done to ensure every

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child, regardless of income, is taught by a highly qualified teacher."

The promise of a fair distribution of teachers has been overshadowed by a related goal of the law. By the end of the 2005-06 school year, states were supposed to make sure that every core academic class was taught by a highly qualified teacher.

No state made the deadline. So Education Secretary Margaret Spellings ordered states to submit new plans on how they will comply. They were made public in late July.

Education Trust researchers reviewed those plans and found:

_ 40 states did not analyze whether minority students were being shortchanged.

_ 18 states did not report whether poor kids get an unfair share of unqualified teachers.

_ Virtually no state reported on whether poor or minority students had larger shares of "inexperienced" teachers. The law uses that term but leaves it open as to how to define it.

_ Only three states reported complete data on the quality of teachers assigned to poor and minority kids. They are Ohio, Nevada and Tennessee. The report commends those states for steps they take to get quality, experienced teachers into at-risk schools.

The report recommends that the Education Department reject the majority of the state plans, issue clearer guidance and order the states to start over.

No Child Left Behind, approved by Congress in 2001, is at the heart of President Bush's domestic agenda.

On The Net:

The Education Trust: <http://www.edtrust.org>

Education Department: <http://www.ed.gov>

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