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Middle schoolers need math too.

December 8, 3:51 PM
by Patrick Cobbs, [Philadelphia Education Examiner](#) [Add a Comment](#)

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The Education Trust recently [reported](#) that high poverty and high minority schools are more likely to rely on teachers who are teaching outside of their area of expertise for key academic courses. The problem is especially bad in mathematics in the middle school years, a subject where highly qualified teaching correlates strongly with high student achievement.

So nationally, "four in ten classes in high-poverty schools are taught by an out-of-field teacher, compared with 16.9 percent in schools serving the fewest low-income students," The report states. And "In schools with high percentages of African-American and Latino students, nearly one-third of mathematics classes are taught by out-of-field teachers, compared with 15.5 percent in schools with relatively few minority students."

It's hard to tell how Philadelphia fares on this scale. The school district did not respond to a request for information on this subject, but there are definitely a few bits of good news. The first is this; you can ask them yourself tomorrow, Dec. 9 at 6:00 p.m. at the Kingsessing Recreation Center in Southwest Philadelphia near 50th & Kingsessing. The [Philadelphia Student Union](#) and other community groups are putting on a Community Forum for Teacher Quality and Equity. Dr. Heidi Ramirez of the [School Reform Commission](#) and others from the district will be there. Be sure to ask them about out-of-subject teachers.

And here's something else you can ask them about. While the district, strongly pushed by the SRC, has had much success in reducing the number of non-state certified teachers in its classroom, certified teacher levels in the middle grade still lag, according to a 2007 [report](#) by Research for Action.

No Child Left Behind statutes and state mandates imposed in 2002 by the state takeover of the Philadelphia schools both require "highly qualified teachers", which generally means state-certified teachers, in schools.

On some fronts Philly has done pretty well. In 2003 certification in the district was at 89.6 percent, according to the report, but it rose to 95.3 percent in the 2006-07 school year. K-8 and elementary schools tended to have the highest certification rates (95.6%) followed by high schools (92.8%) but the 'kids in the middle' still seem stuck. Middle school certification rates were at 89.2 percent, the report said. That's up from a choking 38.5 percent in 2001.

The picture gets a little cloudier as far as out-of-subject teachers at the middle school level.

"We know only whether they [middle school teachers] are certified in *any* field (usually an elementary certificate, which in Pennsylvania covers K-6th grade). We do not know whether the 7th and 8th grade teachers in the data are "highly qualified" by NCLB standards, which means they must have a secondary or middle-level certificate to teach in one of the core content areas," the report said.

So on Tuesday, make sure to ask Dr. Ramirez if the district knows yet what that number is. Because seventh and eighth graders need math too.

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Name: _____

Patrick Cobbs

[Philadelphia Education Examiner](#)



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Patrick is a long time resident of Philadelphia, an experienced journalist and writer of fiction. Among his major themes is the question, how do things get this way while everybody is looking?

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